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The Experiences of Female Sexual Minority Service Members After 2013

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Abstract

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MA, University of Puerto Rico, 2000

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

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Abstract

In 2010, the United States Armed Forces ended the policy Don't Ask, Don't Tell that excluded sexual minorities from being able to serve openly in the military. Full military benefits were extended to them and their family members in 2013. Despite these changes, victimization, stigma, and discrimination have continued to impact the lives of service members who identify as a sexual minority, as the result of microaggressions due to their sexual orientation. Past literature has examined experiences of sexual minorities, but little research has focuses on sexual minority women whose minority gender identity creates greater risk to experience micro assaults with the heteronormative, patriarchal military culture. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of female sexual minority service members in the military since 2013. Minority stress theory provided the theoretical framework for this study. Data were gathered through in-depth, semistructured interviews from 10 participants from the five branches of service. Themes that emerged through thematic analysis of the data were (a) the influence of sexism and gender and (b) rank and leadership, with a subtheme of disclosing sexual orientation. All the participants noted both sexual harassment and sexism towards women in the military; however, direct experiences varied depending on gender expression and racial identity. Participants reported lack of support from their leaders because of their sex, but depending on feelings of acceptance in the units and ranks, they share sexual identity. The significance of this study provides understanding that can be used to improve and create better services for female sexual minority service members.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The goal of this research was to understand female sexual minority service members' experiences in the military post-2013 and how their perception of inclusion and stress management could be impacting them and their families. In the literature reviewed, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals confront stress as a result of the social norms established by the dominant groups within a heteronormative society (Pelts et al., 2015). This stress could potentially lead to mental health problems. However, there is no identified research in the literature specifically looking at women's experiences after changes in military policy extended benefits to LGB service members and their families. The study was needed because it is important to understand experiences related to sexual orientation and gender to address the possible stressors impacting the lives of female sexual minority service members and their families.

Background

Since the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) in 2010, the military cannot discharge LGB service members because of their sexual orientation; service members can now openly serve their country (Alford & Lee, 2016; Schoonmaker & Dichristina, 2013). In 2013, the United States Supreme Court ruled Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) unconstitutional. Once same-sex marriage was legalized in all 50 states, the Department of Defense immediately extended to LGB service members and their spouses benefits such as medical insurance, on-post housing, childcare, legal services, and ID cards, among others (Alford & Lee, 2016; Schoonmaker & Dichristina, 2013). The extended policies for LGB service members included nonchargeable leave to those

wanting to get married in a different state from their residency (Department of Defense, 2013). On June 26, 2015, the United States Supreme Court ruled that states cannot ban same-sex marriages, resulting in the legality of same sex marriages regardless of their state of residency (Ashford & Lee, 2016; Department of Defense, 2013). However, despite the changes in policy, LGB service members have continued to report concerns of victimization due to sexual orientation (Ashford & Lee, 2016; Pelts et al., 2015).

Current research has focuses generally on men, and there has not been a unique examination of women's experiences. In addition, the literature reviewed demonstrated that LGB service members are in need of mental health services, especially women service members whose second-class status may result in victimization and violence (Pelts et al., 2015). Nevertheless, there is no identified research in the literature specifically on female sexual minorities' experiences after 2013 when the military policy changes extended benefits to LGB service members and their families.

Problem Statement

Victimization, stigma, and discrimination have continued to impact the lives of service members who identify as LGB despite DADT being repealed (Alford & Lee, 2016; Pelts et al., 2014). Researchers have also revealed that LGB soldiers can experience negative psychological effects, such as posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, substance abuse, and suicide, as the result of microaggressions due to their sexual orientation (Pelts et al., 2014; Wilder & Wilder, 2012). Study results have suggested that LGB service members generally experience isolation and rejection,

resulting in high rates of mental health issues compared with the rest of the population (Pelts et al., 2014).

Repealing DADT has not eliminated victimization, stigma, or discrimination from impacting the lives of service members who identify as LGB (Alford & Lee, 2016; Pelts et al., 2014). The result of isolation and rejection has been found in past studies to reflect higher rates of mental health issues for LGB soldiers compared with the rest of the population (Wilder & Wilder, 2012). Cochran et al. (2013) determined after DADT that the negative effects of discrimination and stigma LGB soldiers face every day resulted in 12% of LGB veterans showing symptoms of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder; this number is higher than heterosexual veterans. In the same study, a correlation between mental health and sexual orientation was identified and showed that 14.7% of LGB veterans reported a suicide attempt, and 55% reported suicidal ideation at least once in their lifetime (Cochran et al., 2013).

Campbell et al. (2017) conducted a study after the changes in military policies for full inclusion of benefits for LGB service members. They discussed the need for mental health services for LGB service members and the disparities in access to those services that this population still faces (Campbell et al., 2017). The authors concluded that the need for LGB service members to be able to discuss their sexual orientation openly is necessary to avoid the disparities in mental health services compared with the rest of the military community (Campbell et al., 2017).

There is an identified need for more research to understand the stressors that LGB service members have faced since 2013, after changes in military policies (Ashord &

Lee, 2016; Pelts et al., 2014; Wilder & Wilder, 2012). There has been no identified research specifically looking at women's experiences after the military policy changes extended benefits to LGB service members and their families. This is important because of the possibility of additional stressors due to their sexual orientation that could be impacting their lives, potentially resulting in depression, suicide attempts, and substance abuse (Pelts et al., 2015). Thus, the present study addressed this gap by examining the experiences of female sexual minority service members who served in the United States military after 2013.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences in the military of female sexual minority service members after 2013, when changes in military policies extended full benefits to them and their family members. A constructivism paradigm guided this study. The constructivism paradigm holds that there is no one reality that the researcher can measure, but there are multiple realities that are valid for the individuals who share the same phenomenon (Ponterotto, 2005). As the researcher, my goal for the study was to understand the individuals' perceptions of reality based on the experiences that they shared. For this research, I used a basic qualitative design to explore how participants perceived their own experiences of a particular situation within their military community. The basic qualitative design provided a deeper understanding of female sexual minority service members' experiences after 2013.

Research Questions

Research question (RQ)1: What are female sexual minority service members' experiences as a female and sexual minority in the military?

Subquestion: How do female sexual minority service members perceive their level of inclusion in the military community?

RQ2: How do female sexual minority service members manage stressors in their lives related to gender, sexual orientation, and military service?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

Minority stress was the theoretical framework used to support the focus of this study in understanding female sexual minority service members' experiences and how potential stressors could be impacting their lives. According to minority stress theory, LGB individuals are a stigmatized group based on their sexual orientation (**Meyer, 1995;** Schwartz et al., 2016). Stress is derived from the social environment of the individual and personal events that the individual faces (Meyer, 2013). The stigmatization LGB individuals are confronted with is unique to this minority group, and this chronic stressor can result in mental health problems (Meyer, 1995; Schwartz et al., 2016). Minority stress theory helps explain the impact of the experiences of female sexual minority service members. Minority stress theory is discussed more in detail in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative research focuses on understanding experiences and how people interpret or perceive life experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this research, I used a basic qualitative design to explore how the participants perceive their own experiences

of a particular situation within their military community. The use of basic qualitative design provides in-depth information to understand the lesbian service members experiences after military changes in 2013.

To collect the data, I used in-depth interviews with self-identified female sexual minorities who were current service members or veterans who served after 2013 to explore their experiences in the military. The data were collected through face-to-face interviews when participants were available. Phone interviews and/or video conferences were a second option when participants were not available. The instrument to collect data was a semistructured interview guide. The identified population of this qualitative research was female sexual minority service members or former service members who served after 2013 within one of the five military branches: Army, Airforce, Marines, Navy, and Coast Guard. After collecting the data through interviews, I coded and analyzed the data for emerging themes.

Definitions

Below I define terms I used within the study.

Armed forces: References one of the five branches of service: Army, Airforce, Marines, Navy, and Coast Guard.

Inclusion: The action or state of including or being included within a group of structure (Oxford Dictionary, 2020). For this study, inclusion referred to a female sexual minority service member's perception of being included within the military community.

Female sexual minority: A cisgender woman who identifies with nonheterosexual sexual orientation and who may engage in romantic or sexual

relationships with other women. This includes women who self-identify as lesbian or any other sexual minority status.

Military community: A term used to refer to a group of individuals who have affiliation with the Armed Forces. This includes individuals who were serving in or have served in the Armed Forces, as well as individuals married to a service member.

Service member: An individual who serves or has served in the Armed Forces.

Sexual identity: Represents personal identification of sexual orientation (Moradi & Budge, 2019).

Sexual minority: Broadly describes those stigmatized or sociopolitically oppressed based on sexual orientation and/or identification (Moradi & Budge, 2019).

Sexual orientation: Refers to personal attraction based on physical, emotional, or sexual attributes not necessarily consistent throughout one's lifetime (Moradi & Budge, 2019).

Woman or female: Terms used to designate the gender of a cisgender woman whose gender matches the sex that they were assigned at birth. A gendered group historically treated with second-class status in the male-dominated military.

Assumptions

Similar to other research studies, I identified some of the assumptions that I found within myself. One assumption that I held is that LGB service members experience rejection and isolation from the rest of the military community. This was relevant to the study because one of the RQs addressed the assumption that LGB service members could experience rejection and isolation due to military community exclusion. This assumption

was based on research suggesting that rejection and isolation occur within this group (Johnston et al., 2015; Pelts et al., 2014; Wilder & Wilder, 2012). I addressed this assumption by assessing alternate explanations in the results, including looking for nonconforming information that could invalidate the assumption.

Another assumption that I held is that LGB service members could be experiencing additional issues such as depression, alcohol, and suicide ideation as the result of stigma and discrimination they experience because of their sexual orientation. I assumed LGB service members experience stressors related to their sexual orientation. In addition, I held the assumption that women have different experiences than men. I assumed LGB service members have different experiences than heterosexual service members and that lesbian service members have different experiences than gay men.

Scope and Delimitations

The focus of the research was to understand the experiences of female sexual minority service members after military policies changed to include them and their family members. A nonprobability, purposeful, convenience sample was used in this research based on the availability of the participants. The main criteria of the participants were identified by self-report. The inclusion criterion for the research sample was for the potential participant to have identified as a female sexual minority service member who served in the Armed Forces at any time after 2013. While the participants had to have identified as a sexual minority (such as lesbian, gay, or queer) they did not need to have shared their identity publicly. Having had a same-sex relationship at the time of their military service was also not required. Participants were asked to self-identify their

sexual orientation and branch of service to be eligible to participate. Exclusion criteria included individuals who identified as transgender, due to the unique experience that gender plays in the military culture.

Limitations

Similar to other studies, there were some limitations within the research. For instance, when the participants were located in inaccessible areas for me, the use of phone interviews or video conferences made the interaction between the participants and me less interactive and more impersonal. The interaction in person between the researcher and the participant is important to connect and understand how the participant feels based on the body language and nonverbal expressions. This limitation was addressed by requesting the best available time for the participant based on her schedule.

Another limitation was the recruitment of the participants who belong to certain organizations' websites, excluding potential participants from other organizations. Another limitation was that the sample did not include equal participation of each branch of service because they were not available. The majority of the participants were female sexual minority service members from the Army.

Another limitation was the convenience sample. Using a convenience sampling strategy could have led to a greater chance of having to exclude potential participants because, within the general population of service members, it was anticipated that there would be fewer potential participants who identified as sexual minority service members. Hence, I used the sampling strategy to recruit participants from all branches of the military to increase the likelihood that an adequate number of eligible participants were

identified. Transferability is also limited to cisgender women who identify as a sexual minority and who have served in the military post 2013. Results do not transfer female sexual minority service members who served prior or to transgender individuals.

Significance of the Study

This research provides understanding regarding the experiences that female sexual minority service members have in the military. The results of this study can inform the practice of providers working with this minority group and help generate advocacy and education in-services to increase the awareness of possible stressors female sexual minority service members confront through their experiences as a sexual minority and woman in the military. This study provides knowledge about female sexual minority service members and their experiences, which can be used to improve services and potentially increase awareness to the military community. In addition, the results of this research can be used to create better services for female sexual minority service members, including tools to minimize any mental health issues, such as suicide attempts, depression, or substance abuse, that could be impacting their lives and their family members.

Summary

After the repeal of DADT in 2010, the Department of Defense made changes in military policies that allowed LGB service members and their families to be included in all services, such as ID cards, housing, medical and mental health insurance, and childcare and legal services. However, these changes did not remove all stigma that sexual minorities experience in the military. The literature reviewed demonstrates that

there is a gap in terms of female sexual minority service members' experiences. Female

sexual minority service members are part of a minority group because of their sexual

orientation and their biologically determined sex within the military community, which is

predominantly a male culture.

To better understand the experiences of women and sexual minorities in the

military, the next chapter reviews the literature on LGB service members' struggle

through the years to be included in the military community. In addition, the focus on

before, during, and after DADT as a time frame helps to understand how policy changes

impacted the lives of LGB service members and their family members. Reviewing the

history of LGB service members within the military community identifies present

implications that potentially impact this minority group and is important to understanding

the experiences of female sexual minority service members.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Since the repeal of DADT in 2010, the military cannot discharge LGB service members because of their sexual orientation, and LGB service members can openly serve their country (Ashford & Lee, 2016; Schoonmaker & Dichristina, 2013). However, the literature reviewed has demonstrated that since DADT ended, victimization, stigma, and discrimination have continued impacting the lives of service members who identify as LGB (Alford & Lee, 2016; Pelts et al., 2014). In addition, the literature reviewed has indicated that LGB soldiers could still be experiencing negative psychological effects, such as posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, alcohol abuse, and suicide, as the result of discrimination, as well as stigma, and microaggressions due to their sexual orientation (Pelts et al., 2014; Wilder & Wilder, 2012). Recent studies demonstrated that LGB service members generally experience isolation and rejection resulting in high rates of mental health issues compared with the rest of the population because LGB service members prefer not to report their sexual orientation to their medical health providers in order to avoid discrimination or bias (Johnson et al., 2015; Pelts et al., 2014; Wilder & Wilder, 2012).

To find relevant literature to review this study, I conducted searches using databases such as Social Work Database, SocIndex with full text, Psych INFO, Sage Journals, LGBTQ Life with full text, Military Medicine, Academic Search Complete, and Department of Defense directives and websites. I also searched directly from journals such as the *Journal of Homosexuality* and the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health*. In addition, I reviewed cross-referenced articles that were reviewed and cited. I

conducted the search using key words such as *DADT or Don't Ask, Don't Tell, LGBT and military, women and military, minority stress and LGBT, lesbian and military, LGB service members and discrimination or stigma, LGB and military and experiences or attitudes or perceptions,* and *LGB individuals and micro-aggressive behaviors.* In addition, I consulted with a librarian to request better options finding specific information for the research. I also reviewed past dissertations related to LGB service members. The literature reviewed was aimed at LGB service members before and after DADT and the connection between stressors LGB individuals confront leading to mental health problems. The timeframe used for the literature reviewed was from 1990 to 2018 to understand the background of LGB service members before and after DADT and the changes that this minority group has experienced that could be impacting their lives.

The literature reviewed demonstrated that LGB individuals confront stress that could potentially lead to mental health problems because of the social norms established by the dominant groups within a heteronormative society. The minority stress theory was the framework for this study examining the connection between the stressors LGB individuals confront due to stigma and discrimination and their subsequent mental health problems.

Minority Stress Theory

Stress is derived from the social environment of the individual and personal events that the individual faces (Meyer, 2013). Meyer (2013) proposed the minority stress theory to establish the connection between the stressors that LGB individuals face as a result of the beliefs and actions of the dominant group related to sexual orientation and

the subsequent mental health problems minority groups face because of those stressors. The concept of *dominant group* refers to the majority of the culture as heterosexual individuals (Cordeiro-Rodriguez, 2018). For instance, LGB individuals are considered a minority group because of their sexual orientation and are considered different from the heteronormative dominant society. According to Meyer, the stressors occur because members of the dominant group in a heteronormative society act towards LGB individuals in an aggressive and microaggressive way, leading to mental health problems within this minority group. Nadal et al. (2016) defined microaggressive behavior as verbally offensive and discriminatory communication towards a minority group.

Minority stress theory posits that the prejudice and discrimination LGB individuals experience could increase mental health issues within this minority group (Alessi, 2014). According to Meyer's minority stress theory, LGB individuals experience the effects of negative social attitudes that could result in isolation and/or hiding their sexual orientation from family and friends (Alessi, 2014; Meyer, 2003). Minority stress theory postulates four principles: (a) LGB individuals experience stigma in society because of their sexual orientation and this causes them stress, (b) LGB individuals learn how to be vigilant in terms of those events that are expected to cause them stress, (c) LGB individuals internalize the negative attitudes society has towards them because of their sexual orientation, and (d) some may not disclose their sexual orientation because of fear of rejection (Alessi, 2014; Gonzalez et al., 2018; Meyer, 2013). Meyer (2013) explained that the minority stress theory focuses on a process that continuously goes from

distal events and conditions of the environment to proximal personal perceptions that individuals have about themselves.

Meyer (2013) defined distal events as stressors LGB individuals continuously face, such as discrimination and violence. Proximal events are defined as the individual perception of oneself within the minority group. For instance, a distal minority stressor that LGB individuals experience could be peer rejection during their childhood and discrimination due to their sexual orientation (Pachankis et al., 2015). An example of a proximal minority stressor could be feelings of rejection that they have internalized, resulting in psychological distress (Lindquist et al., 2017; Meyer, 2013; Pachankis et al., 2014). In conclusion, Meyer explained that the perception LGB individuals have about themselves within the heteronormative society and how they adapt to the stressors, stigma, prejudice, and discrimination could impact their mental health resulting in psychological distress.

Nadal et al. (2016) defined *microaggressive behavior* as verbal communication towards a minority group that is offensive, derogatory, and discriminatory, either intentional or unintentional, that could lead to mental health problems such as depression and low self-esteem. For example, the use of the term *gay* with a negative connotation or as a joke could be considered a microaggressive behavior because it could signal a denigration of an individual's sexual orientation as something negative or worthy of derision (Nadal et al., 2016). Another example of microaggressive behavior is when someone refers to gay men as feminine and lesbians as masculine, resulting in jokes and stereotypes that are offensive and discriminatory towards this group (Nadal et al., 2016).

This explanation of microaggressive behaviors is important to demonstrate that heterosexual individuals could express implicit and/or explicit bias towards LGB individuals that could potentially affect them negatively (Nadal et al., 2016).

There is a distinction between microaggression and aggression that LGB individuals experience. The concept of aggression was defined by Otis and Skinner (1996) as acts of abuse towards individuals that include threats, verbal abuse, physical assault, and sexual assault, either by heterosexual or homosexual individuals, specifically towards LGB individuals, resulting in victimization. In conclusion, microaggressive and aggressive behaviors towards LGB individuals could impact them negatively, leading to subsequent mental health problems due to the stressors that result from stigma and discrimination.

Diamond (2003) critiqued the minority stress theory. The author argued that the feelings LGB individuals have for others could be defined beyond their sexual orientation and their sexual identity. The author concluded that researchers should be focused on the experiences of each individual with same-sex and other-sex experiences to determine the strengths of the individual and how they adapt after those experiences. However, it is important to emphasize that the minority stress theory focuses on the stressors LGB individuals face as the result of discrimination and stigma within a heteronormative society that could potentially lead to subsequent mental health problems when they do not adapt in the environment where they live, not necessarily their individual same-sex and other-sex experiences.

Understanding of how previous evidence-based studies in the literature support the minority stress theory and the connection with LGB individuals is important. Some researchers have described how the minority stress theory has been discussed in order to identify the connection between the additional stressors LGB individuals confront and the emotions and affection that they experience that could lead them to subsequent mental health problems (Alessi, 2014; Meyer, 2003, 1995). The connection between additional stressors LGB individuals confront and what Eldahan et al. (2016) discussed affection is defined in terms of the positive emotions, negative emotions, and anxiety symptoms to explain the connection between minority stress and the emotions of gay and bisexual men.

Eldahan et al. (2016) examined the connection between the minority stress experiences that gay and bisexual men confronted in a 30-day time frame and how affection and emotions influence their lives. They concluded that daily minority stress had a high impact on negative and anxious affection within gay and bisexual men, leading to depression and anxiety disorders. Similarly, Lindquist et al. (2017) conducted a study using a nationwide online survey with LGB students to examine the connection between the experiences LGB individuals had in their childhood with victimization, bullying, and childhood trauma and the psychological distress they had in their adulthood as the result of those experiences. The findings of the study supported that the stressors LGB individuals experienced in their childhood of victimization and bullying had a connection with depression during their adulthood, leading to mental health problems.

Social support could play an important factor for LGB individuals in adapting and dealing with the additional stressors that they experience as the result of discrimination and stigma. Some researchers agreed that, depending on social support LGB individuals have in their lives, the subsequent mental health problems could be worse (Levahot & Simoni, 2011; Schwartz et al., 2016). Levahot and Simoni (2011) explained the connections between social support for lesbian and bisexual women, minority stress, and poor mental health. They noted that lesbian and bisexual women who had experiences of discrimination, hiding their sexual orientation, internal homophobia, and minimum social support had mental health problems related to depression and anxiety (Levahot & Simoni, 2011; Meyer, 2013). They concluded that lesbian and bisexual women who had experiences of discrimination and reduced social support tend to isolate themselves (Levahot & Simoni, 2011).

Puckett et al. (2017) discussed the importance of social support, minority stress, and how LGB individuals are impacted with additional stressors, depending on the level of support that they have from community resources. According to the authors, the more social support LGB individuals have from the community resources available as well as in their personal relationships, the fewer mental health problems they might have. They intended to understand how social support from the community level and the experiences with stigma LGB individuals have within the community determined the level of subsequent stressors LGB individuals confront and how individuals responded to those stressors in terms of mental health problems. They concluded that the ability to cope with

marginalization and minority stress experiences is dependent on the community resources LGB individuals have available.

Schwartz et al. (2016) examined the connection between minority stress and poor mental health problems, using a sample of 471 gay and bisexual men. The authors assessed minority stress by measuring the frequency of discriminatory experiences and level of social support that participants had. The authors concluded that depending on how individuals deal with their emotions when they interact with stressors related to their sexual orientation and the social support that have in their lives, the outcome of subsequent mental health problems could be worse.

Mendez et al. (2016) conducted a case study to explore how minority stress interacts with stigma based on the stressors LGB individuals experience and the impact on their mental health. The authors discussed the intersectionality between being a woman, lesbian, and low income with the lack of support from friends and families as contributing to LGB individuals' additional stressors. They concluded that a lack of social support from friends and families could add more stress to their lives of LGB individuals. Social support that LGB individuals have from family and friends and from the community where they live is important in determining how they can adapt to higher levels of stress that could potentially result in negative mental health problems.

The stressors that LGB individuals confront as the result of stigma and discrimination from a heteronormative society could potentially lead them to substance alcohol or drugs to relieve the stressors in their lives. For example, Levahot and Simoni (2011) examined the impact between minority stress and substance abuse in lesbians. The

authors tested minority stress and how the stressors affect the mental health of this minority group. They defined the term *gender expression* as including social categories that some lesbians inhabit, such as *femme* and *butch,* that could lead to stressors, and subsequent mental health problems. They measured gender expression, prejudice events, social support, and alcohol abuse associated with psychological problems and frequency of drinking, as well drug abuse. The authors defined *prejudice events* as verbal and physical victimization experiences that LGB individuals have had in the course of their lives. The authors noted that gender expression was related to minority stress because of frequent victimization related to sexual orientation and a lack of family support. These stressors led to substance use and mental health problems (Levahot & Simoni, 2011). Finally, they found minority stressors such as LGB victimization, self-identity as an LGB individual, and hiding one's sexual orientation were associated with less social support from the community.

Lewis et al. (2016) explained the connection between drinking problems and minority stress in lesbian women. They predicted that racial minority and socioeconomic status were factors that increased discrimination in lesbian women because they tend to isolate themselves, resulting in psychological distress and drinking as a coping mechanism to relieve the stress. They measured the experiences with discrimination participants had within the previous year, reasons they reported on why they drank to relieve their stress, and how often and how much alcohol they drank. They concluded that the experiences lesbian women had with discrimination had a strong relationship with

social isolation and lack of support from the community as the result of their sexual orientation, resulting in heavy drinking as a coping mechanism.

The substance abuse in LGB individuals is a coping mechanism that some LGB individuals use to relieve the stressors they face related to discrimination and stigma as the result of their sexual orientation. In addition, some of the studies demonstrated that those stressors could be related to suicide within LGB individuals. Irwin and Austin (2013) tested the connection between minority stress and an increase of negative outcomes such as suicide ideation and attempts experienced by lesbian women. They explained how lack of support from family and friends, depressive symptoms, alcohol abuse, and low self-esteem were associated with suicide ideations or attempts. In addition, they tested whether stressors related to stigma, discrimination, and lack of social support were connected to suicide ideations or attempt. They measured each variable to determine the experience of the participants with each stressor, including potential suicide ideations or attempts. The authors concluded that, based on the sample of their study, lesbian women had considered suicide in their lives, and more than 15% of the participants reported that they had made at least one attempt as the result of their experiences with stigma, discrimination, and lack of support from family, friends, and the community (Irwin & Austin, 2013). The research supports that the stressors that LGB individuals experience as the result of discrimination and stigma could potentially lead to suicide attempts and/or ideations within this minority group.

LGB individuals who served within the Armed Forces potentially experienced additional stressors related to stigma and discrimination during their years of service.

Before and after the military policy DADT was implemented, LGB service members did not disclose their sexual orientation to protect themselves from violence, discrimination, and stigma. This lack of disclosure added additional stressors to this group (Burks, 2011; Shilts, 1994). LGB service members decided to hide their sexual orientation to continue their military careers, potentially causing them depression and psychological distress, leading to isolation from others (Johnson et al., 2015). The silent rule that LGB service members did not disclose their sexual orientation was the best example over the past years of how this minority group confronted potential experiences of discrimination and stigma that could lead to mental health problems. The background of DADT will provide a better overview of the history and how it impacted LGB individuals. While the literature reviewed focused on LGB service members, little research specifically looked at female sexual minorities in the military.

LGB Individuals in the Military

Before DADT

Gay soldiers have been discriminated against since World War I, when military policies did not allow them to serve in the military, resulting in hiding their sexual orientation for many years (Ramirez & Sterzing, 2017). During World War I, between 1914 to 1918 under the Articles of War, the act of *sodomy* was punished and considered a felony, even when the act was consensual (Berube, 1990; Pelts et al., 2015; Ramirez & Sterzing, 2017). In 1919, the Navy Training Station in Newport, Rhode Island, decided to use navy men to entrap men having sex with men with the purpose of court-martialing them and sending them to jail for the crime of sodomy (Shilts, 1994). Gay service

members who were found guilty of homosexual behaviors were treated as criminals and sent to jail between 1920 and 1930 (Pelts et al., 2015).

During World War II, between 1939 to 1945, military policies were implemented to exclude homosexuals from active-duty service, as well as discharging them dishonorably, for the reason that they were non-normal and sexual psychopaths (Pelts et al., 2015, p. 207). Between 1940 to 1950, gay soldiers were considered a security risk and anti-LGB policies were imposed in the Armed Forces for the following 50 years (Shilts, 1994). However, in 1957, a committee was appointed by the Secretary of the Navy to prepare a report to submit recommendations for the revision of policies, procedures and directives dealing with homosexuals. The Crittenden Report was produced in 1950, and it concluded that gay people were not a risk, sexual identity was not a problem for the military to obtain a career, LGB orientation was not related to job performance, and LGB individuals had served honorably (Frank, 2012; Hicks, 2009; Mann, 2013; Ramirez & Sterzing, 2017; Shilts, 1994). The Crittenden Report emphasized and concluded that LGB service members did not represent a security risk for military cohesion, the morale of the military was not at risk, and sexual orientation should not be considered as the sole reason to discharge an LGB service member (Mann, 2013; Ramirez & Sterzing, 2017). In addition, the report emphasized that alcoholism and adulterous behavior by heterosexual people represented a greater security risk and diminishment of good order and morale of the military than sexual orientation (Sinclair, 2009).

The Navy's leaders decided to mark the report as classified information to avoid publication to the general public because they did not want the military community to

recognize homosexual rights ahead of civilian society (Canaday, 2009; Miller, 2009; Parco & Levy, 2012). Also, according to the Navy's leaders, the Crittenden Report did not have any data that could support the findings that homosexuals did not represent any security risk for military cohesion (Shilts, 1994). The Department of Defense continued defending the assumption that LGB service members had a negative impact on the unit cohesion and morale of the military community (Connell, 2017). It was not until 1976 that the Navy was forced to publish the report as the result of the request of a group of attorneys that obtained it through the Freedom of Information Act (Ramirez & Sterzing, 2017; Shilts, 1994).

In 1950, the Uniform Military Code of Justice (UMCJ) was created; it contained the official first ban of homosexuals serving in the military (Pelts et al., 2015). In 1973, as a consequence of homosexuality being expunged from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM),* the Armed Forces could no longer discharge LGB soldiers for mental health problems, and they started using administrative behavior as the reason for discharge (Johnson et al., 2015; Ramirez & Sterzing, 2017).

After the removal of homosexuality from the DSM, Department of Defense Directive 1332.14 (Department of Defense, 1982) stated that LGB service members represented a risk because their sexual orientation degraded the morale of the military mission. As the result of this policy, between 1980 to 1990, approximately 17,000 LGB service members were discharged (Johnson et al., 2015). However, other studies demonstrated that there was no evidence LGB service members were a problem for the military mission because of their sexual orientation (Johnson et al., 2015).

In 1988, the Personnel Security Research and Education Center (PERSEREC) conducted a study that found no evidence LGB service members represented a greater security risk to serve in the military; sexual orientation was not related to the job performance of LGB service member (Frank, 2012). Another study, in 1992, conducted by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), found that 17 different countries, including Israel, Canada, Germany, and Sweden, had opened their Armed Forces to LGB members and none of them had experienced issues. The study concluded that homosexuality was not an issue within their military.

The RAND study, conducted in 1993 by the National Defense Research Institute, evidenced that additional six countries permitted LGB service members to serve within their Armed Forces without any issues with recruitment, unit cohesion, morale, or effectiveness (Frank, 2012). The study concluded that sexual orientation in the military should not determine who could serve in their force.

Military policies before 2013 defined homosexuality as a criminal behavior or psychiatric disorder and served to justify homosexual individuals as unfit to serve in the Armed Forces (Ramirez & Sterzing, 2017). LGB active-duty service members were sent to mental health hospitals and were discharged without honor (Shilts, 1994). Between 1993 to 2009, approximately 13,000 LGB service members were discharged (Burks, 2011).

Even though homosexuality was no longer considered a mental health disorder, nor was serving in the military considered a security risk, LGB individuals were still affected by stressors related to stigma and discrimination within the community. The

Congress decided to enact a new policy for LGB service members to serve freely within the Armed Forces: DADT. However, this meant that LGB service members had to keep their sexual orientation private if they wanted to continue their military career.

The Impact of DADT

Bill Clinton promised in his Presidential campaign that he was going to open the military to LGB individuals to serve (Ramirez & Sterzing, 2017). However, in 1994, President Bill Clinton signed DADT as a compromise between people who disagree with LGB individuals serving in the Armed Forces and those who were advocating for the right of LGB individuals to serve. The policy allowed LGB individuals to serve in the Armed Forces, but they had to keep their sexual orientation hidden (Burks, 2011; Ramirez & Sterzing, 2017). A few months later, after President Clinton signed DADT, the policy was amended as Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue, to prevent harassment and violence towards LGB service members, including by their Commanders (Ramirez & Sterzing, 2017). The Department of Defense was the major opponent of this compromise. As the result of the opposition, the policy was rejected at the beginning but later was accepted as long as the homosexual identity of service members would be kept in secrecy (Connell, 2015). Within this policy, LGB individuals were allowed to serve in the Armed Forces, but they had to hide their sexual orientation (Ramirez & Sterzing, 2017). DADT was a policy that regulated the privacy of LGB service members in terms of their sexual orientation, which they had to keep confidential. The policy also stated that LGB service members could be discharged if there were evidence of same-sex behavior, including serious relationships between them (Johnson et al., 2015). Basically, the policy penalized

the sexual orientation of LGB service members in addition to their behavior, not only while they were in the work environment, but in social environments, as they could not disclose their sexual orientation at all, forcing them to keep silent (Johnson et al., 2015). The policy was contradictory because on one side it allowed LGB service members to serve in the military freely, but on the other side, they had to hide their sexual orientation from the prevailing traditional heterosexual society within the military (Burks, 2011).

The military policy continued targeting same-sex behaviors and verbalized an enhanced environment of discrimination and stigma against LGB service members (Burks, 2011). The policy continued to be referred to as DADT even after its amendment in 1994 (Ramirez & Sterling, 2017). In addition, DADT required doctors, chaplains, mental health providers, and Commanders to disclose confidential information related to LGB service members and their sexual orientation (Burks, 2011; Ramirez & Sterzing, 2017).

The first attempt to repeal DADT was made in 1996, when U.S. Republican Representative for California, Duncan Hunter passed a repeal in the House of Representatives, but it failed in the Senate (Connell, 2017). The second unsuccessful attempt to repeal DADT was made in 2004 through three judicial cases, *Log Cabin Republicans v. United States, Cook v. Rumsfeld,* and *Witt v. Department of the Air Force.* The case *Witt v. Department of the Air Force* challenged the dismissals of LGB service members through DADT policy. The case won in the appeal and the ruling was called the "Witt Standard," under which the military had to prove that an LGB service member was a threat against the order and morale of the community.

One repercussion of DADT for LGB service members was on their ability to report sexual trauma within the military. Ramirez and Sterzing (2017) discussed that LGB service members that were victims of sexual trauma decided to remain silent about their harassment and attacks because they were scared of retaliation by their opposite-sex perpetrators. Military leaders considered sexual trauma towards LGB service members as neither a problem nor a priority within the community. LGB service members that were victims of sexual trauma avoided being treated for their assaults by military providers in order to avoid being outed and facing discharge. Military providers wrote articles about sexual trauma in the military as an effort to educate the community about LGB service members and sexual trauma, but military leaders paralyzed the efforts to provide education to the community about this topic (Shilts, 1994).

Another impact of DADT on LGB service members was on their ability to access mental health services through military providers. Military providers were required to follow the Department of Defense policies by reporting to military officers when LGB service members disclosed their sexual orientation to them (Johnson et al., 2015). This practice created an ethical dilemma for military providers that resulted in their not discussing with LGB service members any topic related to their sexual orientation, as a way of reconciling their federal and ethical obligations.

Burks (2011) analyzed the impact of DADT on LGB service members and how the policy impacted higher rates of victimization within this minority group and decreased numbers of reports of sexual assault and harassment. The author discussed the concepts of *sexual stigma, heterosexism,* and *enacted sexual stigma,* and how those

concepts are connected with LGB service members within the military community. Burks defined *sexual stigma* as negative attitudes that the society has against LGB individuals that result in *heterosexism,* defined as the cultural belief that a heterosexual orientation is the norm within society. In addition, Burks defined *enacted sexual stigma* as discriminatory verbal and physical behaviors that LGB individuals confront and that could result in victimization and harassment. The author noted that incidents of sexual violence against LGB service members were underreported and/or minimized. In 2003, the Service Members Legal Defense Network (SLDN) documented over 4,600 incidents between 1994 and 2002 reported by LGB service members involving verbal and physical abuse and death threats. The conclusion was that DADT had created an environment of fear of military discharge for LGB service members that affected the reporting of victimization and harassment because confidentiality was not guaranteed under the policy.

After the Repeal of DADT

In 2009, Aaron Belkin, who was an activist at the Palm Center, was advocating to repeal DADT. The Palm Center is an independent research institute committed to sponsor and enhance the quality of public dialogue about critical and controversial public policy issues (Palm Center. Org). The center provides research on sexual minorities in the military and has been published leading social scientific journals (Palm Center.org). Aaron challenged the recently elected President Obama to issue an executive order for the repeal (Connell, 2017). As a result of President Obama's approving attitude towards legislation for the repeal, U.S. Democratic Representative of Pennsylvania, Patrick

Murphy initiated the amendment ending DADT and adding a sexual nondiscrimination policy to the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), which passed in the House of Representatives, but failed in the Senate with the opposition of Senator John McCain. The Department of Defense created a Comprehensive Working Group, which conducted a report to work with any possible objections that the repeal could have within the military community (Burks, 2011). The purpose of the working group was to examine the perception of service members in terms of how the repeal could impact military readiness and unit cohesion. The survey was provided to service members and their spouses, and the results concluded that the repeal of DADT would have a minimal effect on the military community. Even with the positive results of the report, the repeal failed again in the legislature (Connell, 2017). Representative Murphy introduced the Don't Ask Don't Tell Repeal Act, removing the sexual nondiscrimination policy, and, finally, Congress passed the bill.

After 17 years of DADT, in September 2010, the United States District Court for the Central District of California ruled that DADT was unconstitutional and violated the free speech protections within the Fifth Amendment. In October 2010, the Court directed the Department of Defense to restrict and stop enforcing DADT. In November 2010, the United States Senate and House passed a bill for the repeal of DADT, and in December President Obama signed the bill; however, a period of 60 days was part of the timeline for the legislation to take effect (Burks, 2011). The DADT Repeal Act was not fully effective until September 2011, finally eliminating the practice of discharging service members for homosexuality (Alford, & Lee, 2016).

One year after the repeal of DADT, US Navy leaders conducted a survey to measure the attitudes of service members about LGB service members serving openly within the Armed Forces (Ashford & Lee, 2016). The results were favorable, with fewer negative attitudes reported about LGB services members serving openly. Another survey was conducted by US Navy leaders with opponents of the repeal to measure if military readiness, effectiveness, unit cohesion, recruiting, retention, and family readiness were impacted by the repeal of the policy (Ashford & Lee, 2016; RAND, 2010). The results of the study did not identify any negative impact in any of the areas that were measured (Ashford & Lee, 2016).

The repeal of DADT represents an incomplete step to eliminate discrimination and stigma against LGB service members (Burks, 2011). The repeal of DADT did not address protection for this group against possible discriminatory treatment (Ashford & Lee, 2016). Some studies suggest that even after repeal of DADT, LGB service members still do not feel comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation because of negative retaliation against their military careers (Ashford & Lee, 2016; Parco & Levy, 2013). In an example of discriminatory treatment, same-sex married couples could not participate in the military marriage retreat provided by the chaplains, because same-sex marriages are not recognized as legitimate by military chaplains (Engel, 2015). In addition, the new policy did not provide guidance for military providers on how mental health services should be provided to LGB service members and the inclusion of their sexual orientation in treatment (Johnson et al., 2015). The provision of adequate mental health services to LGB service members continues to be impacted after the repeal DADT, because military

mental health providers have to be trained on appropriate services for LGB service members who are serving openly (Ashford & Lee, 2016). Other studies conducted revealed that LGB service members considered military mental health providers to be biased and unhelpful and did not address their sexual orientation with them (Asford & Lee, 2016; Burks, 2011).

In 2013, with the decision of the United States Supreme Court to declare Section 3 of the DOMA unconstitutional, the Department of Defense extended benefits immediately to include LGB service members and their spouses. LGB service members and families could then receive benefits such as medical insurance, on-post housing, childcare, and legal services, among others, just as their heterosexual service member colleagues (Alford & Lee, 2016; Schoonmaker & Dichristina, 2013). The extended policies for LGB service members also included nonchargeable leave to those service members that wanted to use it to get married in a different state from the one of their residency at a time when same-sex marriage was not legal in all states (Department of Defense, 2013). On June 26, 2015, in the Obergefell v. Hodges case, the United States Supreme Court decided that no states could ban same sex marriages, resulting in the legality of LGB marriages regardless of their state of residency (Alford & Lee, 2016; Department of Defense, 2013).

Some studies suggested that US society still has negative perceptions and attitudes towards gays and lesbians (Bates-Bailey et al., 2013). The literature concerning public opinion about LGB service members is limited, but prior studies suggest a

reduction in negative attitudes against LGB service members serving openly after the

repeal of DADT (Wallenberg et al., 2011).

Connell (2018) conducted a qualitative study by interviewing 16 ROTC

heterosexual identified cadets in the Boston area with a sample of eight men and eight

women. The purpose of the study was to investigate how the military was educating its

cadets in terms of gender and sexuality. In addition, the author investigated the

knowledge of the cadets about the repeal of DADT and if LGB cadets were able to

openly continue their trainings. The author noted that depending on the area where the

cadets lived, the attitude against LGB service members could vary. For instance, in

southern areas of Boston cadets had negative attitudes against LGB service members,

while in northeast area cadets accepted LGB service members serving openly.

Experiences of LGB Service Members

Martinez et al. (2012) examined how LGB service members perceived attitudes

from their coworkers and how LGB service members received administrative actions in

comparison to heterosexual service members after the repeal of DADT. The authors

predicted: (1) military members will have lower levels of personal comfort with LGB

service members as coworkers than heterosexual service members, (2) military members

will indicate a greater likelihood of pursuing administrative action against LGB service

members than heterosexual ones, and (3) military members' attitudes toward LGB

service member serving openly will have a positive relationship to personal comfort and

a negative relationship with administrative actions against LGB service members. They

used a sample of 181 active-duty Air Force members in the survey, of which 84% were

male. The results of the survey confirmed the first hypothesis: participants were not comfortable having LGB service members as coworkers, but the survey results did not support the second hypothesis about pursuing a greater number of administrative actions against LGB service members than heterosexual service members. The third hypothesis was supported: There was a positive relationship between attitudes towards LGB service members serving openly, but the prediction of a negative relationship with administrative actions against LGB service members was not supported. The authors suggested future studies to examine long-term consequences, because the survey was conducted immediately after the repeal. Johnson et al. (2015) discussed that after the repeal of DADT, LGB service members still did not feel comfortable openly disclosing their sexual orientation with coworkers or military providers. The authors noted that LGB service members reported feelings of vulnerability and emotional distress when they decided to disclose their sexual orientation.

Military culture has been considered a male culture. Even though women have been given important roles within the armed forces, they still face difficulties (Bateman, 2015). For instance, many women in the military who reported sexual harassment were labeled as lesbian and feared being discharged during the years of DADT. Bateman discussed that lesbians are a minority group within the Armed Forces. From 1994 to 2000, 13.6% of lesbian service members were discharged because of their sexual orientation. Rostad and Long (2007) explained that social attitudes towards lesbians are different than those towards gay men because of their gender differences. Lesbian service members are different from gay service members because the military institution is

predominantly men, and lesbian service members are identified as weak and inferior (Poulin et al., 2009).

Even before disclosing their sexual orientation, female sexual minority service members are considered a minority and second class because of their gender; their sexual orientation adds additional stressors to their lives (Pelts et al., 2015). Poulin et al. (2009) examined the reason behind discharges of Canadian military service women who belonged to a minority group. The authors focused the study on examining the intersection between sexism and homophobia within the Canadian military, resulting in discriminatory practices against lesbian service members. Similar to previous studies, the authors found that lesbian service members coped with their fear of coming out by having a double life: being heterosexual within the military and lesbian when they were out of their work environment.

The experiences of female sexual minority lesbian service members after the repeal of DADT are limited. Past studies have confirmed that lesbian service members experienced harassment through verbal and physical abuse, discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment during their stateside military service as well as while they were deployed (Mattocks et al., 2013). Lesbian service members have also experienced victimization after leaving their military careers because of their gender and sexual orientation. One study has shown that lesbian veterans experienced discrimination and rejection after disclosing their sexual orientation to their health providers. The authors examined the healthcare needs that lesbian veterans might have and the quality of services they received regardless of their sexual orientation. They conducted a study

involving male and female veterans receiving care at two facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA; Mattocks et al., 2013). The authors analyzed and explored sexual orientation, physical and mental health, combat and sexual trauma exposure, and satisfaction with VA care. The findings of the study demonstrated that lesbian veterans had high rates of mental health and smoking-related problems, experienced higher rates of military sexual trauma than heterosexual veterans, and had higher rates of heavy drinking. The authors concluded that lesbian veterans reported fears of negative attitudes against them if they disclosed their sexual orientation to VA health care providers during DADT.

Recent studies have supported the experiences of discrimination and stigma that lesbian veterans had when receiving services with the VA (Mattocks et al., 2015; Shipherd et al., 2018). Mattocks et al. (2015) conducted a mixed methods study with 20 lesbian veterans at the Department of Veterans Affairs to examine lesbian veterans' experiences and perceptions with discrimination and stigma because of their sexual orientation during the provision of health care services. The results of the study were that 10% had experienced discrimination and stigma, 50% decided to not disclose their sexual orientation to avoid mistreatment, and 70% reported that sexual orientation should never be asked by the provider unless the veteran decided to disclose. The authors concluded that even though many lesbian veterans believed that the VA was trying to have a discrimination-free environment, they still experienced discrimination. Mattocks et al. (2015) recommended future studies to explore a bigger sample of lesbian veterans.

Lesbian service members have experienced discrimination and stigma during and after their military careers.

Based on the literature reviewed, the role of women in the military has to be mentioned to identify how female sexual minority service members could have been impacted by this role. The vision of the women in the military has changed a little. However, is important to emphasize that the military community is predominantly for men. The history and research of LGB individual serving in the military and military policy tends to focus on gay men. While DADT did affect female sexual minority members, as women they have different experiences with the military than male sexual minorities, similarly to their heterosexual counterparts. Similar to sexual minorities, women have also had to struggle for great acceptance and inclusion into the military. A female sexual minority service member may have a unique experience due to her minority status as a woman and a sexual minority in the male-dominated military system.

Women in the Military

The role of women in the military has changed since World War II, but they still struggle in a military community predominantly served by men (Damiano, 1999). Even though many women decide to join the military to serve both short-term and as a career, the attitude of women as weak has changed little through the years. Women are considered inferior or weak within the military community because of their gender. Yet women have been attempting to push forward and attain leadership positions to further their military careers.

Women in the military were not able to serve officially until World War I; however, it was not until the end of World War II, in 1948, that the *Women's Armed Service Integration Act* was enacted, codifying the role of women in the military (Doan & Portillo, 2017). The policy was considered discriminatory because it had restrictions on military women based on their gender. The policy allowed women to serve, but they could not go into combat, were not allowed to have a higher rank than Lieutenant Colonel, and could not be officers over men (Morden, 1990). In 1994, the Department of Defense enacted a policy called the *Direct Ground Combat Exclusion Policy* to officially exclude women from combat zones (Burrelli, 2013). However, in January 2013, the Department of Defense decided to override the exclusion policy to maintain an equal environment within the military for women and men. The ban on women in combat zones was lifted in 2016, allowing women to serve in any combat-related military occupational specialty (MOS), including ones that were traditionally reserved for men (Collins-Dogrul & Ulrich, 2018; Pawelczyk, 2017). Nevertheless, equality for women and men in the Armed Forces did not happen officially until January 2016, when all positions were open for women to serve in combat zones (Doan & Portillo, 2017).

Currently, women in the Armed Forces serve in 95% of all occupations and they represent 16.3% of the active-duty forces (Goldstein et al., 2017; Pawelczyk, 2017). In addition, the number of veteran women seeking services with the Department of Veterans Affairs has been increasing (Goldstein et al., 2017). However, women have been considered by official authorities within the Armed Forces in the military as second class, as "the others," and as a force that damages cohesion within the community (Collins-

Dogrul & Ulrich, 2018; Pawelczyk, 2017; Pelts et al., 2015). The male-dominated

environment within the military overwhelmingly considered women as needing of

protection and men as the ones who were their protectors (Doan & Portillo, 2017). Doan

and Portillo (2017) examined the barriers and benefits that military women had while

they were deployed and how their gender could possibly impact their job performance.

The authors used the experiences of men and women in the military to establish a

connection between their gender and their job performance. They concluded that women

in the military had to prove their ability to perform their duties more than men did. In

addition, they concluded that men in the military, while deployed, have maintained

higher rates of leadership positions in combat zones than women.

The attitudes of the general public towards the role of women within the military

community are divided (Collins-Dogrul & Ulrich, 2018). In a study by Collins-Dogrul

and Ulrich (2018) conducted with online readers, one out of 10 participants were worried

about military readiness if women were in combat-related positions, while one-fourth of

the readers commented that women should be prohibited completely from serving in

combat-related positions. In 1992, a Roper Poll found that 45% of the general public

supported women in combat roles and in 2013 a different survey conducted by Pew

Research Center found that 66% supported lifting the ban on women serving on combat

zones. Evidently, through the years, the public's positive attitudes towards women

serving in combat roles have been increasing and support that women serve equally as

men in all military positions.

The distinctions that remain between women and men have been maintained by the predominantly masculine culture in the Armed Forces (Collins-Dogrul & Ulrich, 2018). Stereotypical attitudes towards women as military leaders still remain evident (Alvinius et al., 2016). Equal rights based on gender have been considered an issue within the military community where women still have to prove their abilities (Marencinova, 2018). Even though prejudice against women in the military has decreased in recent years, the military community still has a preference for male leaders. Some of the problems that women military leaders have confronted relate to the difficulty that both men and women have following orders from a woman, making the leader's role more challenging (Alvinius et al., 2016).

Careers of women in the military are marked by challenges and experiences that differ from those of men. Among the challenges that women in the military face are intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual assault during their military careers (Ditcher et al., 2018). In 2010, it was reported that more than 35% of military women had experienced sexual violence during their military careers; however, many women decided not to report the violence or seek mental health services because of the negative impact of mental health treatment as a sign of weakness. Another challenge that women in the military confront is discrimination in a male culture. This discrimination results in alienation, decreased unit cohesion, and a high risk in developing mental health problems (Thomas et al., 2018). Thomas et al. (2018) discussed that 31% of military women faced discrimination as the result of their gender in their workplace, 12.8% faced harassment

and sexual assault during their careers, and 11.7% had problems with the lack of recognition as professionals.

Serving in the Armed Forces as a woman and as a lesbian could be more difficult because of the intersection of membership in two groups. Lesbian service members are considered part of a minority group because of their sexual orientation. In military culture, males are predominant and they hold the majority of high-ranking positions. However, through the years, women have been making gains in obtaining high-ranking positions as well, achieving leadership and successful careers within the military community.

Limitations and Strengths

Similar to other studies, there are some strengths and limitations within the literature reviewed for LGB service members and their experiences after the changes in military policies. One limitation was the use of many convenience samples that were disproportionate in terms of ethnicity, gender, civil status, age, and prior military experience (Gonzalez et al., 2015; Gonzalez et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2016; Wallenberg et al., 2011). Another limitation was the use of biased sampling techniques that might limit the generalizability of the findings such as recruiting LGB individuals that belong to some organizations without including the ones that do not belong to any of those organizations (Matarazzo et al., 2014).

The use of phone interviews that made the interaction between the researcher and the participants less interactive and impersonal (Van Glinder, 2017) was another limitation. In addition, small and nonrandom samples were used that could

underrepresent other categories that were not included in the locations where they were recruited (Dichter et al., 2018; Irwin & Austin, 2013; Lea et al., 2014; Weitz, 2015). The need for research on the experiences of military women within their careers, including their need for mental health care services (Alvinus et al., 2016; Braun et al., 2015; Harel-Shalev et al., 2017) was another limitation identified. The literature reviewed demonstrated that the number of women included in samples used in the research is small, impacting the validity of the studies because they will not represent the general population.

The growing amount of literature for LGB individuals and how they cope with stigma (Nadal et al., 2016), emerging studies focusing on women in the military community (Thomas et al., 2018), and the significance of community resources for LGB women that are identified as part of a minority group (Puckett et al., 2017) could be some of the strengths identified in the literature reviewed. However, in terms of methodology and the validity of the information, the majority of the researchers do not use in-depth interviews as the methodology to collect the data, limiting rich and thick information that could impact trustworthiness of the existing research.

Gap in the Literature

The literature reviewed demonstrates that the studies that have been conducted before, during, and after DADT reflected the experiences of LGB service members in general, but were not directly about female sexual minority service members. There is no identified research in the literature specifically looking at women's experiences after the military policy changes extended benefits to LGB service members and their families.

This is important because of the possibility of additional stressors due to their sexual orientation that could be impacting the lives of female sexual minority service members, potentially resulting in depression, suicide attempts, and substance abuse (Pelts et al., 2015).

After the repeal of DADT, the literature reviewed demonstrates that the majority of the studies were focused on men and did not cover lesbian service members. It is unknown how female sexual minority service members experienced the changes of the repeal and how this could be impacting their lives. The present study addresses this gap in the knowledge of the experiences of female sexual minority service members in order to understand how to serve them better.

Summary

After DADT, female sexual minority service members and veterans have tried to receive services through military providers, disclosing their sexual orientation with them. It is important to identify the possibility of discrimination and stigma during and after DADT as reflected within a female sexual minority's experiences. After reviewing the literature, there are no identified studies that explore the experiences of female sexual minority service members and veterans after 2013 and how those experiences could be impacting their lives and the reception of services.

In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology that I used for the research, including the role and position that I held, the selection of the participants and the sample selected, the instrument that I used to collect the data, how the data were analyzed, issues

of trustworthiness and how credibility was established within the study, and potential

ethical concerns that could emerge during and after data collection.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of female sexual minority service members and the changes in military policies made in 2013 that provided full inclusion of LGB service members and equal access to family military benefits. The literature reviewed focused generally on men as there has not been a unique examination of women's experiences. The literature review also revealed lack of research on women's experiences after military policy changes in 2013 extended benefits to LGB service members and their families. In addition, the literature reviewed demonstrated that LGB service members are in need of mental health services, especially women service members who have been considered as second class, resulting in violence and victimization by men (Pelts et al., 2015). The goal of this research was to understand female sexual minority service members' experiences in the military post-2013 and how levels of inclusion and stress management could be impacting them and their families.

I chose a basic qualitative research design to address the identified gap in research on the experiences of female sexual minority service members who have served in the military after 2013. To collect the data, I used in-depth interviews with self-identified lesbians who were current service members or veterans who served after 2013 to explore their experiences in the military. This chapter includes a description of the basic qualitative research design and the rationale for selecting this design to explore the experiences of lesbian service members after the changes in military policies in 2013. In addition, this chapter includes my role as the researcher within the study, the RQs, participant selection and recruitment procedures, and data collection, including data

management and analysis strategies. Finally, I discuss issues of trustworthiness and ethical concerns that could be present in the study.

Research Design and Rationale

For this qualitative study, I chose a basic inquiry approach to answer the following RQs:

RQ1: What are female sexual minority service members' experiences as female and a sexual minority in the military?

Subquestion: How do female sexual minority service members perceive their level of inclusion in the military community?

RQ2: How do female sexual minority service members manage stressors related to gender, sexual orientation, and military service?

The goal of qualitative research is to understand and explore how individuals perceive a situation that could be impacting their lives (Creswell, 2014). In this research study, I explored the experiences of female sexual minority service members after 2013, when changes in military policies allowed full military inclusion for this minority group. Some concepts, such as female, sexual minority, and military community, were identified to understand and explore how participants perceived the experiences that they lived, after those changes in military policies, as the result of their gender and sexual orientation that placed them in a minority group within the Armed Forces, which is a culture that is predominantly male dominated.

Qualitative research focuses on the understanding of the experiences of how people interpret or perceive those experiences that they live (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Within qualitative research, exploring the experiences of the study participants has traditionally involved asking particular questions, data collection from particular to general, focusing on inductive analysis, and the interpretation and meaning of the data (Creswell, 2014). For this research, I used a basic qualitative design to explore how the participants perceived their own experiences of a particular situation within their military community.

The basic qualitative design, also called generic or interpretative, differentiates from phenomenology, case study, grounded theory, and ethnography in that it does not follow an established philosophical assumption (Kahlke, 2014). Similar to other qualitative designs, the basic design allows researchers to understand of how people interpret the meaning of their experiences (Merriam, 2002). Ethnography focuses on the investigation of a social group that is defined by a culture; case study is an investigation in depth of a single case; grounded theory recollects data to develop a theory for the process that is investigated; and phenomenology investigates the lived experiences of the participants, including attitudes, opinions, and feelings (Percy et al., 2015). The basic qualitative design allows a researcher to explore and understand the personal or subjective reflections of the experiences of the participants (Percy et al., 2015).

The reason I used basic qualitative design is because it was best suited to answer the RQs and further understanding of how female sexual minority service members interpreted the experiences in their lives after 2013, how they constructed their worlds, and how they perceived or attributed the meaning of those experiences. Although other qualitative research designs focus on how the lived experiences of the participants are

constructed, such as phenomenology, basic qualitative design allows for analysis in how

they interpreted subjectively those experiences without an established assumption or

framework. In addition, the basic qualitative design combines methodological approaches

from other qualitative designs without maintaining any formal methodology from the

others (Kahlke, 2014). The basic qualitative design was used to explore the experiences

of the participants based on their own subjective interpretations without defining

internally the meaning of those experiences, such as feelings or attitudes.

A basic qualitative design is characterized by how people understand their lives

and the experiences they have and is centered in a social constructivism framework

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The constructivism paradigm approach posits that people

construct their own subjective ideas about the reality they perceive to experience. This

study viewed the realities of the participants to better understand the experiences of

female sexual minority service members after 2013, and perceptions of inclusion and

stress management when it comes to issues of gender, sexual orientation, and military

service. The constructivist paradigm allowed me to explore these experiences through the

construed realities of female sexual minority service members and further aided in

interpreting the meaning they make of these experiences.

Discovering the experiences that participants might have after changes in military

policies is important in order to explore the personal perception that female sexual

minority military service members have within the environment where they live. Thus,

basic qualitative design was expected to provide information on how each participant

interacted with their social environment within the military community after those

changes. The focus of this basic qualitative design was on how those changes could be impacting the lives of female sexual minority service members.

Role of the Researcher

The identification of and reflection on possible biases, relevance to personal background and values, and potential ethical issues that may arise have to be noted to ensure the well-being of each participant within the study (Creswell, 2014). My role in this basic qualitative design was that of an observer trying to uncover the experiences that female sexual minority service members might experience and contextualize them through the participants' perceptions of those experiences within the military community, through conducting in-depth interviews. My role as an observer was informed by my professional and personal experience working with the military community for more than 10 years, during which I observed how LGB service members have tried unsuccessfully to be included in services, such as mental health, housing, legal, and others in the same way as heterosexual service members. Working with the military community, my job has been to ensure that every service member, for instance, lesbian service members and their family members, are included in services available for them. I decided to pursue this research mainly because of my many years working with this community. Ponterotto (2005) discussed the focus of the role of the researcher as an observer. The role that I had as a researcher was an observer to ensure that I learned from the lived experiences of female sexual minority service members and then use the data gathered from the in-depth interviews to interpret the experiences that they shared for future researchers in this area. Creswell (2014) discussed the importance of recognize and reflect in qualitative research,

how personal values and biases could be impacting the analysis of the results, so the identification of both is included to protect the accuracy of those results. For instance, as an observer of my research, I routinely reflected on my thoughts, reactions, and potential biases at the conclusion of each interview through reflection notes to ensure I was mindful of any biased thoughts or actions that might have been present during interviews. I used these notes to make any adjustments if needed to protect the integrity of the data collected and my interpretation of the data.

Power dynamics are an issue a researcher should be mindful of when conducting interviews. The participants might feel they have little to no power at all regarding the interview process and the information they are providing the researcher. I reassured each participant that the interview process was designed to protect their agency because they could stop the interview at any time they wished, and they had full say over the information that can be used. Power dynamics are important to emphasize with female sexual minority participants. Because of my background working with the military community, it was important that I addressed any potential personal biases that I might have had towards possible discrimination and stigma against female sexual minority service members during the interpretation of the experiences of this minority group. As the researcher, I wanted to be sure they were fully assured of their shared authority during the interview process and that they could let me know at any time if they experienced problems or were uncomfortable with any part of the interview experience, so that I could make adjustments to the process. As an observer and outsider in the study, in which the participants were part of a minority group, I needed to ensure that participants understood

that my research was for them and not on them (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This meant that I had to ensure that the participants understood that the position I had towards the study was to learn from their experiences and to interpret the results based on their personal perspectives. As the researcher of the study, I needed to protect the confidentiality of each participant's identity because they were disclosing private and sensitive information based on their own experiences that could have involved issues of discrimination and stigma. Based on the literature reviewed and the experience that I have had working with the military community, I worked to remain self-aware when interpreting the data collected and analyzing them in order to avoid any issues with credibility.

Creswell (2014) discussed the importance for the researcher to protect the participants before, during and after the duration of the research as the topic could be sensitive for them in terms of their privacy and confidentiality. It was necessary that I did not have any personal and/or professional relationship with the participants of the study because the data collected and the credibility of the analysis could have been affected. The protection of each participant's privacy and confidentiality will be discussed further.

A potential ethical issue that I addressed was the use of an incentive for participants to cooperate in the study. The possibility of an incentive of a $5 Starbucks gift card was a small amount and was viable and reasonable to encourage participation. In addition, the incentive did not represent an undue influence and did not risk harm by obtaining it. To avoid potential ethical issues with the use of an incentive, and similar to other dissertation studies, the purpose of the incentive was identified as a way to thank

participants for their time and interest in the study and to recognize that their experiences were valuable for this research (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 1990). After both interviews were completed, each participant received the incentive of the gift card that was sent electronically to their emails.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The identified population of this qualitative research was female sexual minority active-duty service members or former female sexual minority service members who served after 2013 within one of the five military branches: Army, Airforce, Marines, Navy, and Coast Guard. To select the participants, I asked within my personal network, national and international, depending on where the individuals in network were located. These individuals were asked to distribute the recruitment flyer by hand, in person, or through email to potential participants. The potential participants were asked in the flyer to contact me directly via email or telephone and the individuals distributing the flyer were not informed of who did or did not contact me. In addition, I recruited participants by posting on the social media pages (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and blogs) of organizations that supported the community of LGB service members and their families, such as Military Partners and Families and the American Military Partner Association. The recruitment process was a challenge because female sexual minority service members are considered an invisible population who is not readily identifiable, and they are part of a minority that makes the recruitment process more difficult and dependent on availability.

Creswell (2014) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discussed the selection of the research sample was a nonprobability purposeful selection and snowball sampling. This means that the participants were selected based on specific criteria, allowing me to potentially identify participants that would provide information-rich experiences to answer the RQs and based on availability. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that the criteria-based selection in the sample was important to determine the attributes of the sample that reflected the purpose of the study and the identification of rich information from the participants. The collection of in-depth information from each participant were rich data for the purpose of compiling and analyzing the results of the research and thus increasing the understanding of the experiences that participants have had after the changes in military policies.

The inclusion criteria for the sample for this research were identified as female sexual minority service members who served in the Armed Forces at any time after 2013. In addition, as part of the inclusion criteria, the participants had to identify as a sexual minority, such as lesbian, gay, or queer, but the self-identification was only to themselves and they did not need to have identified publicly as a sexual minority during their service. The participants did not have to have been in a same-sex relationship at the time of their military service. Participants were asked to self-identify their sexual orientation and military affiliation. Based on a nonprobability purposeful sample, the use of a convenience sample was used in this research because of the availability of the participants. The main criteria of the participants were identified by self-report. I ensured

that each participant who contacted me to participate voluntarily in the study met the

criteria by asking question how they identified themselves.

Creswell (2014) reported that the size of the sample should be determined

depending on the qualitative design that the researcher chooses. The sample size is

determined by the questions being asked, the data being gathered, the analysis in

progress, and the resources of the researcher to support the study in accordance with a

basic qualitative design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The size of the sample was 12

participants, but 2 of them decided not to continue. The saturation process was achieved

through the in-depth interviews and was determined to have been achieved when

redundant information emerged and no new information was revealed. This means that

the responses of the participants to the questions are the same and no data are available

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once I believed saturation had been achieved, I conducted 1

additional interview to confirm saturation. If those interviews with the additional

participants had not confirmed saturation, then I would have continued with the

recruitment process until saturation was achieved.

The participants were identified when they contacted me through the flyers

distributed (Appendix A) and announcements made on Facebook, Instagram, blogs, and

websites such as Military Partners and Families and the American Military Partner

Association. The participants were asked to contact me via email or phone to schedule the

interview. My contact information was listed in the flyer. It was important that the

potential participant met the criteria of self-identification as a female sexual minority and

current or former service member who served after 2013. In addition, I sent them all the

forms needing to be signed at the beginning of the face-to-face interview, through secure and encrypted email or by U.S. mail. The informed consent and the interview guide (Appendix B) were discussed with each participant prior to the interview.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

After identifying the sample for the study, the data were collected through face-to-face interviews of 1-1.5 hours in duration, when participants were available to meet in person; phone interviews and/or video conferences was a second option when participants were not available geographically. The location to meet was determined based on the location that was most convenient for them. When the participants did not have a preferred place to meet, I suggested to meet in a library or any other community space that allows privacy.

The interview guide as seen in Appendix B, was the instrument I used to collect the data. I developed the guide based on the literature reviewed, theory researched, and dissertation committee feedback. The interview guide consists of semistructured open-ended questions designed to collect information, such as experiences as a woman in the military, their experiences once they disclosed their sexual orientation to leadership and/or others, and managing stress and experiences with inclusion in the military as part of the minority group. In addition, some demographic questions were included such as identification of sexual orientation, gender identity, rank, age, relationship status.

Once it was determined that a participant met the criteria and was willing to participate in the study, the next step was to discuss the informed consent and provide an explanation of the study and the types of questions that were included in the interview

guide. The discussions were by phone or email. After we discussed the informed consent and confirmed willingness to continue with the research, I set the date for the interview. At the interview, I discussed again the consent form with the participant to ensure they understood what was being asked of them and to confirm that they did not have questions. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could leave the study any moment with no repercussions. I also explained that the data collected would be protected and confidential. I explained that the interviews were to be audio recorded, but that I would ask them first to confirm consent to be recorded. The audio-recorded data was secured in a confidential and encrypted file and was erased when the analysis process was completed. Finally, I ensured that the participants understood that I would schedule a 30-minute follow-up interview within a month after the first interview to ask any additional questions that emerged during transcription process. This interview was for the purpose of expanding the information or clarifying the participant's ideas. As part of this follow-up interview, I asked if they wanted to share anything about the topic that had come up since the initial interview.

Once any questions asked about the consent document and the interview procedure and guide had been answered and the participant agreed to participate in the research, I continued with the process of asking the questions from the interview guide. This process ensured that the participant understood the consent form, the question asked, and that they were able to ask for clarification if necessary. It was important that they were aware that they could contact me before, during, and after the interview for any questions that might have arisen for them during this process.

The recruitment stage will be discussed in detail later in the next section. I began

scheduling and conducting interviews throughout the recruitment stage. I expected that

the recruitment stage would occur over a period of 2-3 months. This timeframe was

extended to 4 months. After the initial interview, I transcribed the recording within 2

weeks of conducting the interview. Within a month of the initial interview, and after the

transcription, I then contacted the participant to schedule the follow-up interview. The

follow-up interviews were conducted by phone, unless participants prefered another

method. Follow-up interviews were also recorded and transcribed. Once recruitment

ended and all participants had completed the follow-up interviews, I sent participants a

summary of the results.

Data Analysis Plan

After collecting the data through interviews, I first organized the data by

transcribing the interviews of each participant (Creswell, 2014; Saldana, 2016). I

classified the data collected into categories in order to have a general idea of the

similarities in the information that each participant provided, writing notes in the margin

of every transcript and keeping a journal of crucial information (Saldana, 2016).

Data were then coded. A code is a word or short phrase that assigns an attribute

for a portion of the text used in the transcript (Saldana, 2016). I used the open coding

method instead of using a code book. I transcribed everything and coded the transcription

to answer the RQs. I used in vivo codes, using a verbatim word or short phrase as the

code. I coded significant words, statements, or texts that related to the RQs. I also coded

transitions, as when a participant is talking about one topic and transitions to a different

topic. For instance, if a participant was talking about their experience on base and then transitioned to take their experience off base, I used a direct word or short phrase from the text of the transcript as the in vivo code.

After identifying the initial codes within the interview, I then deciphered the meaning of those codes based on the RQs, which defines the process of *decoding* (Saldana, 2016). I identified the categories by assigning the meanings of the codes into one category, consolidating each code in the category in which it belongs based on the RQs. After identifying the categories, I then identified the themes that emerged from those categorized codes (Saldana, 2016). The themes that emerged from the process of coding answered the RQs.

Dedoose is a software for coding electronically and was used to manage the data and assist with the analysis process. As part of the analysis process, I included discrepant or negative data that emerged during this process. Discrepant or negative data is information that does not match the themes that have emerged. For instance, the individuals could be less accessible or represent a larger population with different experiences, or the sample could be biased toward individuals who had different experiences. I ensured that the discrepant data were included, and I compared them with the rest of the data.

The next section will discuss how trustworthiness was established within the study. To ensure the trustworthiness of the experiences that female sexual minority service members had after 2013, the information collected through the interviews needed

to reflect the accuracy of their personal experiences. I will explain how the proposed methods address the trustworthiness of the research study.

Trustworthiness

The concept of trustworthiness refers how the researcher validates the accuracy of the findings using procedures such as authenticity and credibility (Creswell, 2014). Within qualitative research, the concept of trustworthiness is established when the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the findings are transparent (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I ensured that the information provided was recorded and stored in such a ways at to keep the confidentiality of each participant. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (described below) are some of the concepts that define the trustworthiness that was established for the study.

Some of the strategies that I used to establish credibility were member checking, adequate engagement in data collection, reflexivity, peer review, thick description, and an audit trail. The concept of thick description is defined as the way that the researcher describes in detail the context of the study, the interview answers, and the participants' feelings based on the experiences that they reported (Ponterotto, 2006; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used thick description of the information based on the experiences that each participant reported. The concept of member checks refers to the process that the researcher uses to review with participants how they feel about different aspects of the research process that concern each participant (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I conducted a second interview to ask follow-up questions for clarification. Adequate engagement in data collection refers to the time that the researcher spends collecting data until saturation

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I collected data until saturation was achieved. Reflexivity is defined as an ongoing awareness of the position and subjectivity that the researcher has within the study in order to ensure self-awareness of his/her role (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I kept notes of my potential position as a researcher while I am collecting the data from the participants. Peer review refers to the process that the researcher uses to discuss with colleagues the findings, the data that emerged, and potential interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I had a colleague with a PhD provide feedback as part of the peer review process. The concept of audit trail refers to a specific and detailed account of the methods and procedures used, and decisions that the researcher made during the study. I kept a journal to track in detail the procedures and methods that I used. Finally, trustworthiness depends on ensuring that the research is ethically conducted and the well-being of the participants is maintained.

Credibility

The concept of credibility refers to how the researcher can ensure that the findings of the research are credible enough to capture an objective truth based on the information provided by the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The sample selected for the study establishes credibility because I asked participants with direct experiences of the phenomena I wanted to better understand. Credibility is established by using strategies such as member checking, presenting thick description, discussing negative cases, and peer review (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The use of member checks is the first strategy that I used to establish credibility. I conducted a second interview to clarify the transcript and ask follow-up questions to enhance credibility of the data collected in the interviews.

The second strategy was presenting *thick description*. I used rich and thick description from the information that the participants reported based on their personal experiences. The use of rich descriptions for the information that the participants provided of the experiences that they had after the changes in military policies in 2013 was important in demonstrating that the personal situations of the participants were aligned with the research content. Using *thick description* in the interviews, transferability was established with the descriptive data that the participants reported in their answers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The information that the participants reported was rich in content and shed light on the experiences of female sexual minority service members after the changes in military policies. Maintaining focus on the primary objective and rationale for the study, and the methods used to interpret the data collected, was important to reflect the accuracy of the participants' perceptions of those experiences**.**

The third strategy I used was considering discrepant data. I interviewed the participants until redundancy of the information was present, conveying that saturation has been reached. This means that a shared representation of the experiences was not based on a few anecdotal stories. Taking in consideration negative or discrepant data is important to establish credibility. I stayed aware that data that challenge the emerging findings are still crucial for the accuracy and credibility of those findings and must be included to ensure that challenging data are not ignored.

The last strategy that I used is a peer review process to ensure that another person knowledgeable on the topic reviewed and asked questions about the study. I did the peer

review process after the first analysis of the data was made to ensure that the findings were clear based on the data that had been collected. Having someone outside of the dissertation committee read and provide feedback on the findings helps establish the credibility of those findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The peer review process was conducted by a colleague who has a doctorate in clinical psychology. We met every 2 weeks for about 2 hours to discuss the data collected and the findings.

Transferability

The concept of transferability refers to developing descriptive and relevant information that could be applicable to other contexts without losing the context-specific information (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In terms of my research, I established transferability by gathering and conveying thick description of the information provided to participants during their inteveriews to understand their personal experiences. The purpose of thick description is to allow the readers to make comparisons to other contexts or settings based on contextual factors, not to replicate the design and findings. Fully explaining how the sample was selected is another way to establish transferability and to avoid overgeneralization of the population within the study.

Dependability

The concept of dependability refers to the stability of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The data collected are rendered dependable by the way they answer the study's RQs. I established dependability by using a journal. In the research journal, I recorded dates and initial analyses as well as conducted memoing in order to ensure that another researcher could audit the process. Memoing is the process that the researcher uses to

track over time the challenges, ideas, and discoveries associated with the research design

and the analysis. For instance, in the journal I recorded the initial codes, the categories,

and the themes that emerged. The use of memos support the credibility of the process.

Adequate engagement in data collection by conducting two interviews instead of one also

help establish dependability.

Confirmability

The concept of confirmability refers to the awareness of personal biases and

prejudices and how the findings are confirmed taking in consideration reflexivity of those

biases and prejudices (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The use of reflexivity was the strategy that

I used to establish confirmability. I maintained a journal that reflected my personal

perspectives, biases, and assumptions to ensure that my personal values did not influence

the findings and conclusions. In addition, this process will enhance and validate

credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the research and the data collected

because of the awareness of any of my personal perspectives that may have influenced

the analysis. The use of thick description during the interview process also establishes

confirmability, because it allows the reader to understand the context and interpretations

of the participants. Maintaining an audit trail by keeping track of the methods, procedures

and decisions that research makes during the data collection is another way to establish

confirmability.

For this basic qualitative design, ethical concerns must be determined as part of

the establishing trustworthiness. The awareness of those ethical concerns by the

researcher is crucial in demonstrating the competency of the person who collects and

analyzes the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Ethical dilemmas can emerge when collecting the data or analyzing the findings. In the next section, I present some of the potential ethical concerns of this research.

Ethical Issues

As part of the analysis procedure, an ethical concern that I could have encountered is an obscuring of the perspectives and the voices of the participating individuals in favor of my personal perspectives. Awareness of the possibility of this happening is crucial to avoiding the misrepresentation of the participants' experiences and undermining the validity of the findings. Identifying potential ethical issues is important for the transparency of the findings.

Before the collection of data or any contact with the participants of the study, I applied and received approval with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that ethical dilemmas were addressed and to avoid any possible harm to the participants. The protection of the participants of the study from harm, the right to privacy, and the understanding of informed consent are some of the concerns that must be addressed ahead of time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The clarification of the relationship between me and the participants was identified to avoid any potential ethical dilemma (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It was important that the participants understand my role as an observer within the study and how their identities would be protected to avoid harm. I ensured that the confidentiality of each participant was protected, particularly because of the sensitivity of the information that they provided when they self-disclosed their identities as part of a

minority group. I used pseudonyms and did not report any participants' identifying information.

Another ethical dilemma that I could have encountered was the protection of the data in terms of storage, online recruitment, and the use of emails to communicate with participants. In terms of storage, the data collected was stored in my personal laptop, in an electronic file, with a protected unique password known only by me to ensure confidentiality. No other individuals had access to the laptop or file. In addition, the identification information of each participant, such as contact information, was stored in a different word file and protected with a unique password. The consent was signed by each participant and available via email or scan. The consent forms were protected as well with a password to ensure confidentiality. I transcribed all interviews. The transcribed data was protected in a folder with a password. After the completion of this dissertation, the contact file will be destroyed and/or shredded. I am the manager of all data collected and stored for 5 years. I maintained the audio files and secured them in a confidential and encrypted file. They will be destroyed after analysis of the data has concluded.

Incentives have been used to attract research participation activities for at least 100 years (Ulrich et al., 2005). The justification for this use is to encourage recruitment activities in cases where the participants are difficult to recruit without some type of incentive (Ulrich et al., 2005). I anticipated that this will be the situation in my study and I proposed a small amount of $5 gift card incentive. I did not expect that this will have any undue influence. Because no concerns arose, I sent each participant the gift card

incentive after they completed both interviews. In addition, I ensured that each participant understood that the participation was voluntary and that they could leave the study without any repercussion. Two of the participants that decided to leave the study earlier, were sent the incentive gift card anyway (IRB #06-16-20-0530773).

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the methodology that I used in the basic qualitative design. Also discussed were the role of the researcher and the establishment of trustworthiness, including the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability and how those concepts are enhanced and may affect the analysis of the findings. In addition, the identification of negative and/or discrepant information that could have potentially challenged the findings was discussed. Finally, the ethical issues that could arise during the process of data collection and analysis were addressed to ensure that I was adequately prepared to address them and maintain the confidentiality of each participant's identity and the information they provided.

In the next chapter, I present the findings of the research study. Within the findings, also I present any methodological changes that occurred between what I proposed and what actually happened. I present sample characteristics and explain the analysis process. Finally, I present themes that emerged.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of female sexual minority service members after 2013 when changes in military policies extended full benefits to them and their family members. A constructivism paradigm guided this study. The constructivism paradigm holds that there is no one reality that the researcher can measure, but there are multiple realities that are valid for the individuals who share the same phenomenon (Ponterotto, 2005). As the researcher, my goal in the study was to understand the individuals' perception of reality based on the experiences that they shared. For this research, I used a basic qualitative design to explore how participants perceived their own experiences of a particular situation within their military community. The basic qualitative design provided a deeper understanding of female sexual minority service members' experiences after 2013.

The RQs for this study were as follow:

RQ1: What are female sexual minority service members' experiences as a female and sexual minority in the military?

Subquestion: How do female sexual minority service members perceive their level of inclusion in the military community?

RQ2: How do female sexual minority service members manage stressors in their lives related to gender, sexual orientation and military service?

In this chapter, I describe the setting and the participants' demographics. I discuss any potential changes in data collection that was presented in Chapter 3. Also, I discuss the themes that emerged during the analysis.

Setting

The setting for the study was the military community where the participants were openly accepted as part of a sexual minority group after the repeal of DADT in 2011. After the repeal, the spouses of LGB service members were granted the same benefits as spouses of heterosexual service members. Even though the military community is predominantly male, women in the military community have been considered a minority.

The participants were recruited between November and December of 2020. The interview process started in January and ended in May of 2021. The participants were stationed and resided within the United States and Europe. Even though the participants were not stationed in a war or conflict zone when they participated in the study, they could have been deployed at any moment. The recruitment process was a challenge because female sexual minority service members are considered an invisible population who is not readily identifiable, and they are part of a minority that makes the recruitment process more difficult and dependent on availability. Even though the recruitment process took longer than expected, the instrumentation and data analysis strategies did not change from what was described in Chapter 3.

The participants were current service members and veterans who served in the five branches of service, Army, Air Force, Marines, Navy, and Coast Guard, after changes in military policies in 2013. The recruitment process took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it did not affect the schedule for the interviews. I sent the participants the interview guide and consent form they needed to sign prior to the beginning of the interview, through secure and encrypted email or by U.S. mail. Twelve

individuals expressed potential interest in the research. Two of the participants signed the consent and then withdrew before the first interview. Recruitment continued until saturation was completed, which resulted in 10 participants. All 10 participants completed both the initial and follow-up interview.

The data were collected through video conferences because the participants were not available geographically. Participants were located in different places around the world, such as the United States and Europe. Each interview was scheduled based on each participant's availability.

Demographics

The inclusion criteria for the sample were to identify as a female sexual minority service member who served in the Armed Forces at any time after 2013. Participants were asked to self-identify their sexual orientation and military affiliation. The demographics of the participants, such as race, rank, sexual orientation, gender identity, and length of time in the military, were taken as part of the data collection. The demographics are important in understanding how their experiences potentially impacted their experiences as a sexual minority after the military changes in 2013.

Based on race, the demographics were diverse. One participant was Hispanic, four participants were Black, four participants were White and one was more than one race. The majority of the participants were White and Black. The ranks of the participants were divided equally between enlisted and officers: one participant was specialist (E-4), four participants were sergeants (between E-5, E-6, E-7), for a total of five; four participants

were officers (three commanders and one liutenant); and one participant was a retired veteran staff sergeant.

The participants were asked how they self-identified in terms of their sexual orientation. Nine self-identified as lesbian and one self-identified as bisexual. All participants identified their gender as woman and female. In terms of the length of time in the military, the participants had served more than 4 years after 2013.

Data Collection

This basic qualitative research design addressed the identified gap in research on the experiences of female sexual minority service members who have served in the military after 2013. To collect the data, I used in-depth interviews with current active-duty service members or veterans who served after 2013 within one of the five military branches, Army, Airforce, Marines, Navy, and Coast Guard, to understand the unique experiences as LGB and military/former military.

I recruited participants by posting social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and blogs) and organizations that support the community of LGB service members and their families, such as Military Partners and Families and the American Military Partner Association. I also contacted a local pride center in the San Diego and Los Angeles areas to advertise the flyer for recruitment. Potential participants were asked to contact me directly via the email address or telephone number provided on the research announcements. Recruitment lasted 4 months from January to May 2021. Recruitment continued until saturation was completed, which resulted in 10 participants. All 10 participants completed both initial and follow-up interview.

A semistructured in-depth interview guide was used to collect the data. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to collect information such as experiences as a woman in the military, experiences disclosing sexual orientation to leadership and/or others, and managing stress and experiences in the military as part of a minority group.

I sent participants the interview guide and consent form they needed to sign prior to the beginning of the interview, through secure and encrypted email or by U.S. mail. Twelve individuals had originally expressed potential interest in the research. Two of the participants signed the consent and then withdrew before the first interview, leaving 10 participants. Participants were located in different places around the world, such as the United States and Europe. The data were collected through video conference interviews of 1 hour of duration because the participants were not available geographically. Each interview was scheduled based on each participant's availability.

I conducted one follow-up interview with each participant to clarify some of the questions in the first interview. The follow-up interview for each participant lasted approximately 30 minutes. The follow-up interview was scheduled between 1 and 2 weeks after the first interview, depending on the availability of each participant. Each interview was audio recorded. I discussed with each participant the informed consent prior to starting recording. I requested permission from each participant to record the interview. At the interview, I discussed the consent form with the participant to ensure they understood what was asked of them and to confirm that they did not have questions.

The audio-recorded data were secured in a confidential and encrypted file and were erased when the analysis process was completed.

The data collection plan presented in Chapter 3 remained the same. An unusual circumstance encountered in data collection was that the participants were located in different time zones. This circumstance was a factor in the delay of data collection. Depending on each participant's availability, it took more than 1 week to schedule the follow-up interview. Once the first interview was scheduled, the follow-up interview was scheduled to ensure it was within a 2-week time frame. I scheduled the follow-up interview within 2 weeks' time to clarify the information that each participant provided in the first interview to ensure the information was accurate.

Data Analysis

After completing the transcripts for each interview, I started to read the data collected to understand what was reported that was relevant. I used Dedoose, a qualitative data management software, to manage the data and assist with the coding process electronically. During the first cycle, I used in-vivo coding to ensure each participant's perspective and experience was reported. I coded phrases and sentences that were directly from each participant's transcript that included key words that were important in answering the RQs. In this first cycle, I coded 148 codes. Some of the codes had the same meaning and patterns. In the second cycle, I noticed that some of those codes in the first cycle were absorbed or relabeled within one or more major codes. After finalizing the coding process, I arranged and classified the codes into the categories. Originally, I had 35 categories. After reviewing some of those categories, I relabeled and recategorized

some of them because they had the same meaning and concept. I ended up with 20

categories. After regrouping those categories, two themes emerged.

In the next section, I define the two themes that emerged in the study: the

influence of sexism and gender and rank and leadership. The themes were defined to

understand how female service members' experiences in the military were influenced.

The results of each theme are discussed as well.

Results

The Influence of Sexism and Gender

Theme Definition

Female service members in the military face sexism as the result of their sex.

However, the definition of gender as a presentation of their physical appearance

determines the level of harassment that they experience in a predominantly male culture.

Gender's Experiences

The participants of the study reported that to be recognized, they have to prove

their capabilities in their jobs, but even when they have the capability to complete the

assigned job, male counterparts will not accept them as equals. They still face stereotypes

about who they are and how capably they perform their duties because of their sex. The

participants reported that they have been treated as "weak, worthless, and sexual objects"

because of their sex. A captain with 18 years of service shared "Male coworkers will see

you as weak, worthless because you are doing a job that is mostly male driven, such as

Infantry or Artillery." A specialist with 4 years of service added, "I was treated as weak,

incompetent and worthless because I was the only female in my unit and also, I am a

lesbian."

Some participants reported that they, as women, did not feel accepted within their

units. Also, the participants reported that being a woman in a predominantly male

military culture was difficult. These attitudes and beliefs can affect the cohesion for

female service members within their units. For instance, the participants reported that

they had to prove their capabilities in their jobs to be recognized, but even when they

completed their duties, they felt they were not accepted as equals with their male

counterparts. A specialist with 4 years of service explained, "His attitude towards me is

like minimizing my role and duties within the unit. For example, he does not believe I am

capable of going out in the patrol to respond to a situation. I asked him once and he told

me I was too young to respond to a dangerous situation, which is ironic because I went to

Military Police School."

Similarly, a lieutenant with 15 years of service commented, "The military is a chauvinist

culture. What I meant is that male coworkers see you as weak just because you are a

woman, no matter what you do or how you do it, they always going to see you as

inferior."

The participants reported that their sex as females was a disadvantage for them as

service members versus male service members. The majority of the participants reported

sexual harassment as the result of their sex. The inappropriate comments included

referring to them as "sexual objects" and denigrating them as women because of their

sex. One participant did not experience sexual harassment, but she heard a male coworker

making sexually inappropriate comments to another female service member. Also, she reported that her male coworkers referred to her as "butch" because of her physical appearance. Based on the participants' experiences, this suggests that experiences as a female in the military varies depending on gender expression.

Gender and Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment experienced by the participants can be identified two types: sexual harassment based on workplace harassment by treating women as weak, worthless, and/or inferior; and sexual harassment that was sexual in nature. For instance, some of the participants were victims of inappropriate sexual comments, and they also witnessed the sexual harassment toward other female service members. The participants reported that they felt isolated and marginalized within their units based on their male coworkers' behaviors. Regardless of their sexual orientation, the gender of the participants appeared to influence the sexism within their units.

Reporting sexual harassment is an option that female service members have available when they have been victims of harassment from coworkers and/or leaders within their units. However, the fear of retaliation from female service members kept them away from the reporting process. Staying in the closet and not sharing their sexual orientation felt safer for some of the participants in order to not call more attention to themselves as a potential target of harassment. For the participants of the study, feeling safe and protected within their units was important to determine if they would or would not disclose their sexual orientation. For instance, for the participants of the study, going to work, completing their duties assigned, and avoiding any conversations appeared to be

necessary for their protection. A lieutenant with 15 years of service explained, " I never complained about sexual harassment because I was afraid of retaliation." A captain with 11 years of service claimed, "I decided to stay silent because of fear of retaliation."

Another barrier one of the participants reported as related to sexism was the intersectionality in terms of sex and ethnicity. One participant reported that being a female as well as being Hispanic made it hard for her to be accepted within her unit. The following excerpt from one specialist with 4 years of service validated ethnicity: "It is hard to be a lesbian, Hispanic, and female in the military. The three adjectives describe who I am, but in the military culture is difficult because I am a sexual minority."

Even though most of the participants reported experiences with sexism within their units, all of them encouraged new female service members to join the Armed Forces to follow their goals. The participants reported that even with the experiences they had with their male counterparts, they recommended a career within the Armed Forces because they can be successful. A specialist with 4 years of service shared, "I will say to her to always be herself, no matter what others think about her." A retired participant with 10 years of service explained, "The best advice is not to be scared of who you are, just follow your goals." A sergeant with 4 years of service commented, "You learn to stay away from any troubles or confrontations because you want to have a successful career." Finally, a staff sergeant with 13 years of service stated, "I think that the military has come a long way, but still have a way to go."

In addition to recommending and encouraging other female service members to join the Armed Forces, the participants reported that women in the military should be

more supported. The participants advised other female service members that regardless of their negative or positive experiences within the military community, the Armed Forces are a viable way to complete their careers. For instance, even though some of the participants experienced sexual harassment, they worked hard to be promoted because with a higher rank there is less sexual harassment than in lower ranks.

Rank and Leadership

Theme Definition

All of the participants stated that they belong to a sexual minority group. The feelings of isolation and second-class status were consistently experienced by the majority of the participants. Thus, the leaders' attitude toward female service members influenced their experiences and how they felt based on level of unit inclusion within the larger military culture. They reported that leaders within their units do not protect them from sexual harassment and the lack of trust in them is less, depending on their ranks. This suggests that depending on the unit and/or the ranks, the level of protection from leaders varies.

Leaders' Support

Some of the participants reported they joined the Armed Forces as enlisted service members with expectations of achieving a higher rank later within their military career. As enlisted service members, all service members have specialties, and they perform specific jobs that are assigned based on skills they obtained before they joined. Leaders and/or officers provide orders and assigned duties and tasks to enlisted service members. The participants reported that even though they had the skills to perform the job assigned,

the leaders decided if they were qualified to do the job or not. The lack of support from their leaders was reported by some of the participants through their careers, because leaders assumed they were not capable of doing the job assigned as the result of their sex. A sergeant with 4 years of service commented, "Even though I understand someone has to do the desk, I am aware he decided that it was going to be me because I am the only female and I am a Lesbian. I say this because the way he speaks to me I feel he is always angry with me. Once, I asked him if he was upset for anything I did not do correctly and he did not respond. I heard him talking to another male soldier and he said that he wanted me to move to another unit. It was unprofessional. I was a little scared and intimidated by him because I did not want a negative evaluation."

Individuals' Ranks

Within military culture, hierarchy is important because the higher one's rank, the more power they have over the subordinates that are under their supervision. Leaders supervise enlisted service members that are assigned to their units. For instance, E-1 to E-5 are enlisted service members. The majority of the participants joined the Armed Forces as enlisted and they had a Commander who was the leader in their unit. Some of the participants reported that after the changes in military policies that benefit LGB service members, they felt their leaders needed more education to support and protect female service members that are a sexual minority. The participants reported lack of trust toward male leaders because of their inability to protect them and to avoid any sexual harassment within their units.

Of the four ranking officers that participated in the study, they reported that as their careers progressed to higher ranks within the Armed Forces, the level of protection and comfort was higher because they were in a leadership position. They experienced lack of protection from their higher leaders, which impacted their inclusion within their units. A captain with 11 years of service shared, "Leaders need to have more trainings and/or education about how their behaviors and actions towards sexual minority service members could be detrimental to their mental health." Another captain with 10 years of service commented, "It is important education to military leaders to understand how to protect, listen and support lesbian and gay service members that are assigned to their units."

Of the five participants that were enlisted, they reported lesser levels of protection and comfort within their units. A specialist with 4 years of service explained, "There is no inclusion for gay and lesbian service members in their units because leaders do not support us as sexual minority when we are struggling within our units." A sergeant with 5 years of service reported, "I believe the military has written policies to help LGB members feel included which is great. The problem lies with the leadership that do not agree with someone's choice and have problem with acceptance."

However, some participants stated that they felt more comfortable after the changes in military policies that allowed LGB service members to receive the same benefits as heterosexual service members. Some participants reported partial and/or more inclusion than before, even though they agreed that education and training for leaders are very important. A sergeant with 4 years of service commented, "The military has

improved a lot in the military policies for inclusion for lesbian women." A staff sergeant with 13 years of service shared, "It is getting better with the new policies, but still a long road to go."

As mentioned, the lack of protection and distrust from the leaders within their units was reported by some of the participants. However, some of the participants' experiences shifted positively after they were promoted to a higher rank and became a leader. As they moved up in the hierarchy, their experiences within their military's unit shifted. They stated feeling more comfortable, safe, and accepted regardless of their sex or sexual orientation. A captain with 11 years of service stated, "As a Commander, I practiced everything I learned to avoid other female service members struggle the same way I did." Another captain with 18 years of service explained, "I feel safe and comfortable within my soldiers because they respect me as their leader, regardless of my sexual orientation."

The lack of protection and the hierarchy within the military are considered important in determining the openness and disclosure of each participant's sexual orientation within their units. Also, the level of inclusion is another factor used when making the decision of disclosing. Thus, I considered disclosing sexual orientation as a subtheme of rank and leadership to be discussed.

Subtheme: Disclosing Sexual Orientation

Definition

Lack of protection was a factor in the participants deciding if they would disclose their sexual orientation or not within their units. Depending on the individual experiences, they would determine how open they would be.

Level of Safety Within Their Units

The participants reported that depending on how safe they felt within their units, they decided to be open and disclose their sexual orientation to their coworkers within their units. Some of the participants reported they never disclosed their sexual orientation; other participants reported they disclosed their sexual orientation, but they felt isolated by their coworkers. A captain with 11 years of service explained, "After the experience I had in the first hospital I worked that my coworkers socially isolated me, I decided that in my next duty station, I was not going to disclose my sexual orientation. I obtained my rank as a Commander about 2 years ago. When I started in the hospital that I am working now as a Commander, the soldiers that I supervise welcome me pretty good." A lieutenant with 15 years of service shared, "I heard conversations from female coworkers talking about gay and lesbians negatively, I decided to stay quiet about my sexual orientation." A sergeant with 4 years of service reported, "I disclosed my personal life with a female coworker and she decided to tell everyone about my sexual orientation. I felt isolated by coworkers."

Some participants with higher ranks reported that they disclosed their sexual orientation to their soldiers because the power in their ranks protected them. This suggests that they feel comfortable talking to their lower ranked subordinates. A captain with 18 years of service commented, "I feel more comfortable because I can set the rules

for my soldiers. They are aware that I have an open door policy and they can come to me to talk when they need to. I always tell them I don't tolerate disrespectful or bullying in my unit. I am a good leader and I like to set an example for them, so they can learn not to be ashamed of who they are."

The majority of the participants reported that they were treated as inferiors and second class compared with their male counterparts as the result of their sex. Also, the hierarchy in the military culture is relevant in determining how leaders favor males versus females within their units, and how female service members feel protected to disclose their sexual orientation.

Managing Stressors

Military culture can be very stressful because of the challenges and sacrifices service members and their families have to face. For female sexual minorities, the culture can be more stressful as a result of their sex and sexual orientation. Some of the participants reported that they managed stress with counseling, while other participants used meditation and talking to family, including their spouses, to vent their frustrations. A captain with 18 years of service shared, "I looked for individual counseling. It was a very stressful time for me." Another captain with 10 years of service commented, "I am very blessed to have a wonderful partner and family support system which helped me when I was going through hard times." A specialist with 4 years of service commented, "I sought counseling with the Military Family Life Counselors, because I was not feeling good with all the stress and anxiety with my supervisor. I learned how to cope with stress when I feel overwhelmed."

Regardless of how each participant managed their stress, they used positive techniques and resources to manage their concerns and the frustrations that military culture caused as a result of their being part of a sexual minority group. The decision of disclosing their sexual orientation or not within their units depended on the level of safety they experienced.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Evidence of trustworthiness is important to establish the transparency of the data analysis within the study. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (described below) are some of the concepts that define the trustworthiness that was established for the study. The experiences that female sexual minority service members had after 2013 were reflected by using the methodologies and techniques to provide the reality of the participants of the study.

Credibility

Some of the strategies I used to establish credibility are purposeful sampling, member checking, adequate engagement in data collection, reflexivity, peer review, thick description, and an audit trail. The sample selected for this study establishes credibility because I asked participants with direct experiences of the phenomena I wanted to better understand. I conducted a second interview to clarify questions that emerged for each participant during transcription, and asked follow-up questions to enhance credibility of the data collected in the interviews. The primary focus and rationale for the study and how I interpreted the data collected were relevant in reflecting the accuracy of the participants' perceptions of those experiences. I interviewed the participants until

redundancy of the information was present, no new data were emerging from the participants' answers, and saturation had been reached. This means that a shared representation of the experiences was not based on a few anecdotal stories; data were collected based on their individual experiences. The participants' experiences were very similar in terms of being a woman in the military.

Discrepant or negative data were included in the analysis. I was aware that data that challenged the emerging findings were crucial for the accuracy and credibility of those findings and were included to ensure that challenging data were not ignored. It is important to include discrepant information to establish credibility and accuracy of the data analyzed.

I used a peer-review process to ensure that another person that had knowledge of the topic reviewed asked questions about the study. The peer-review process was conducted by a colleague who has a PhD in Clinical Psychology. We met every 2 weeks for about 2 hours and discussed the data collected and findings. I did the peer-review process after the first analysis of the data to ensure that the findings were clear based on the data that were collected. The main purpose of the process was that someone outside of the dissertation committee read and commented on the findings and provided feedback to establish credibility of those findings.

Transferability

In terms of my research, the use of thick description provided sufficient context to understand the participants' personal and unique experiences using rich information directly from the data collected. The participants of the study represented 10 female

service members who were interviewed and answered the questions. They reported their answers based on their identification as a sexual minority and their sexual orientation. Also, the participants reported the timeframe they served in the Armed Forces after 2013. The demographic data collected, such as race, rank, sexual orientation, gender identity, and length of time in the military, were taken into consideration as well.

The 10 participants in the study do not represent the entire population of female sexual minorities within the Armed Forces. The sample that participated in the study had access to the flyer through social media, or from boards placed in different locations.

The themes that emerged during the data analysis can be transferred and/or extended to female sexual minority service members who joined the Armed Forces before 2013. However, the themes cannot be transferred to female service members that identify as transgender individuals. The study was limited to cisgender female service members who were voluntarily available to self-identify as part of a sexual minority group.

Dependability

I used reflexivity as the strategy to establish dependability. I maintained a journal that reflected my personal perspectives, biases, and assumptions to ensure that my personal values did not influence the findings and conclusions. In addition, this process enhanced and validated credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the research and the data collected because of the increased awareness that any of my personal perspectives had the potential to influence the analysis. In addition, I kept an audit trail tracking the methods, procedures, and decisions that I made during the data collection to establish confirmability. The follow-up interview that I conducted with each participant

clarified and was aligned with the information that the participants reported in the first interview.

Confirmability

I established confirmability by using a journal. In the research journal, I recorded dates and initial analyses as well as conducted memoing in order to ensure that another researcher could audit the process. For instance, in the journal I recorded how many and which were the initial codes, how many categories, and memoed the emerging themes. The use of memos supports the credibility of the process. Adequate engagement in data collection by conducting two interviews instead of one also helped establish confirmability. The second interview clarified some questions that emerged after the first interview, this practice confirmed the credibility of the data collected. Rich information based on the shared experiences of each participant during the interview process also established confirmability, because it allows the reader to understand the context and interpretations of the participants.

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RQs

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RQ1: What are female sexual minority service members' experiences as a female and as a sexual minority in the military?

The RQs for the study were guided towards the experiences of female service members after the military changes in 2013 to provide same-sex married couples the same benefits that heterosexual married couples had. While benefits for same-sex couples are the same as heterosexual couples, the military culture is not fully accepting of women. Women who present more masculine in their physical appearance may

experience a different kind of harassment, such as gender expression harassment, than women who present feminine in their physical appearance. This suggests that men do not see more masculine-presenting women as sexual objects in the same way. Sexual orientation adds another layer for potential bias within the military community.

Female service members' experiences vary depending on leadership's acceptance of women in the military. Achieving higher ranks increases respect and reduces discrimination when compared with lower ranks, and the changes in military policies have made female service members' experiences better. There is still a long way to go, even though it has been worth the experience.

Subquestion: How do female sexual minority service members perceive their level of inclusion in the military community?

Overall, the level of inclusion for female sexual minority service members in the military community was high after the military changes in 2013. Female sexual minority service members who were married were included in the same benefits that heterosexual service members couples had, such as housing and medical insurance, among others. However, the level of inclusion and the acceptance they receive by leadership within their unit affects the experiences of female sexual minority service members. Isolation due to gender bias, and lack of support in terms of their capabilities, contributed to their feelings around inclusion.

RQ2: How do female sexual minority service members manage stressors in their lives related to gender, sexual orientation and military service?

Finding ways to manage stressors is an additional factor female sexual minority service members face within military culture. Even though the participants reported that they belong to a sexual minority group, all of them reported feeling stress as the result of both their gender and sexual orientation. The mechanisms that they used to manage stressors involved looking for counseling, meditation, and talking to their spouses or family members.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the data collection process and an analysis of those data. The recruitment process through social media and LGB networks was completed in 4 months. The sample consisted of 10 participants. The analysis of the transcripts of the in-depth interviews conducted revealed the following themes: (a) the influence of sexism and gender, (b) rank and leadership, and (c) disclosing sexual orientation. While participants reported negative experiences related to being a female in the military, they recommended that other women join the Armed Forces.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings in relation to current literature and future research. In addition, I will discuss the social change that this study contributes to regarding this minority group. This study provides preliminary findings that enable further study on this population. These studies and the lessons we will learn from them will be important for LGB service members within the military community.

Chapter 5: Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences in the military of female sexual minority service members after 2013. A constructivism paradigm guided this study. The constructivism paradigm holds that there was no one reality that the researcher can measure, but there were multiple realities that are valid for the individuals who share the same phenomenon (Ponterotto, 2005). In the study, my goal was to understand the individuals' perception of reality based on their experiences that they shared. For this research, I used a basic qualitative design to explore how participants perceived their own experiences of a particular situation within their military community. The basic qualitative design provided a deeper understanding of female sexual minority service members experiences after 2013.

In this chapter, I discuss the interpretation of the findings and how those findings are connected to the current literature base. I also discuss limitations of the study, recommendations and future studies within this research, implications for social workers who are working with this minority group, and the conclusion based on the findings of the study.

In the next section, I discuss the interpretation of the findings based on the data collected and the themes that emerged after data was analyzed. Two themes and one subtheme emerged: (a) the influence of sexism and gender (b) rank and leadership, and (c) disclosing sexual orientation. Next, I interpret the findings and how those findings relate the literature reviewed.

Interpretation of the Findings

Finding #1: The Influence of Sexism and Gender

One of the findings of the study was the influence of sexism and gender. Two types of sexual harassment were identified: One was based on workplace harassment by treating women as weak, worthless, and/or inferior; the other one was sexual in nature. For instance, some of the participants were victims of inappropriate and sexual comments. They also witnessed the sexual harassment of other female service members. The participants reported that they felt isolated and marginalized within their units based on their male coworkers' behaviors. The literature reviewed confirmed that one repercussion of DADT for LGB service members was on their ability to report sexual trauma within the military. Ramirez and Sterzing (2017) discussed that LGB service members who were victims of sexual trauma often decided to remain silent about their harassment and attacks because they were scared of retaliation by their perpetrators. Military leaders considered sexual trauma towards LGB service members as neither a problem nor a priority within the community.

Slathlman et al. (2015) discussed that one of the reasons for sexual harassment towards women in the military could be the higher numbers of male soldiers in comparison with female soldiers. In addition, the authors discussed the greater number of male soldiers with higher rank than female soldiers. The authors emphasized the need for prohibition of derogatory comments towards females soldiers such as sexual comments (microaggressions) that damaged the sense of safety within the units. The authors also mentioned the need for rigorous changes in the policies for sexual harassment in terms of

requiring serious investigation and prosecution. They finished their analysis by pointing to the need for a better confidential process to report sexual harassment to ensure the safety of those who are being harassed. Similar to what Slathman et al. reported, the participants of my study experienced and witnessed sexual harassment by male coworkers within their units regardless of their sexual orientation. The participants also reported that fear of retaliation kept them away from the reporting process of sexual harassment.

Gurung et al. (2018) conducted a study that discussed military sexual trauma among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender service members. The authors explained that the participants were asked to share their experiences of discrimination as the result of sexual orientation or if they witnessed any such behavior. The authors also asked if they experienced any sexual assault or harassment. The authors concluded in their findings that sexual trauma is still a problem within the military community and that women, including lesbian and bisexual females, experienced more sexual harassment and other sexual behaviors than men, including gay and bisexual men. The findings of this study suggest similar information concerning the experiences of female service members having either experienced sexual harassment or witnessed it directed toward other females.

Finding #2: Rank and Leadership

Another finding was the impact of rank and leadership. Lack of support from their leaders was reported by some of the participants through their careers because leaders assumed they were not capable of doing the job assigned as the result of their gender.

Individuals' ranks played an important role in the leaders' support. Within the military culture, hierarchy is important because the higher one's rank is the more power one has over those under their supervision. Leaders supervise enlisted service members who are assigned to their units. Some of the participants reported that after the changes in military policies that benefitted sexual minority service members, they felt their leaders needed more education to support and protect female service members who are members of a sexual minority. The distrust exhibited by and the lack of protection from the leaders within their units was commented on by some of the participants of this study. However, after some of the participants were promoted to a higher rank and became leaders themselves, their experiences shifted due to the protection created from their increase in power. They stated feeling more comfortable, safe, and accepted regardless of their gender or sexual orientation.

Carey et al. (2022) discussed the negative feelings that LGB service members had towards their military service and their leaders while they were active-duty service members. The authors explained that LGB service members reported that they felt less supported by their leaders within their units than heterosexual service members. They also discussed that lesbian and bisexual women decided not to resign their contract as active-duty soldiers because they were not treated equally to heterosexual females in terms of promotions and inclusion within their units. They concluded that if LGB service members had more support and inclusion within their units, they would decide to continue service in the military longer.

Leaders' support is very important for female service members within the military community. Sadler et al. (2018) conducted a study that discussed the need for leaders to receive training and education to reduce sexual harassment and assault towards female sexual minorities. The authors discussed how the climate of the military culture within their units is important for leaders to be aware of in order to protect and prevent female service members from being harassed by coworkers. They concluded that recognition of diversity and respect should be part of the development of education and trainings for leaders who are responsible for creating a safe environment in the workplace. As mentioned above, this study confirms the findings of Sadler et al. The participants reported lack of trust and support from their leaders within their units.

Subtheme: Disclosure of Sexual Orientation

Another finding was the decision that female sexual minority service members made whether to disclose their sexual orientation within their units. The participants reported that the decision to disclose depended on how safe they felt within their units. Some of the participants reported they never disclosed their sexual orientation; other participants reported they disclosed their sexual orientation, but they felt isolated by their coworkers after doing so.

Der Star et al. (2019) conducted a study to discuss the relationship between disclosure of sexual orientation and depression within sexual minorities. One third of the participants of their study reported that they disclosed their sexual orientation with others, while 12.5% reported that they did not disclose their sexual orientation to others. The authors found that there is no direct relationship between disclosing sexual orientation

and depression; however, they discussed that social support from others is important to minimize depression symptoms within this group. The authors' study supported the information the participants reported in terms of the importance of social support in the decision to disclose or not their sexual orientation. The literature reviewed demonstrated that some LGB service members decided not to disclose their sexual orientation in order to continue their military careers, potentially causing psychological distress, including symptoms of depression, and leading to isolation from others (Johnson et al., 2015). Similar to the results found by Johnson et al. (2015), in my study, some of the participants reported that they disclosed their sexual orientation within their units, while others decided to keep their sexual orientation hidden from their others. Overall, the participants reported the level of safety they felt within their units affected whether they disclosed their sexual orientation.

Military culture can be very stressful for female sexual minority service members because of the challenges and sacrifices they and their families face every day. Female sexual minority service members face additional stressors as the result of their gender and sexual orientation. Some of the participants reported that they managed stress with counseling, while other participants used meditation and talking to family, including their spouses, to vent their frustrations. Regardless of how female sexual minority service members managed stress, the majority of the participants reported stress during their military careers. The minority stress theory posits that the prejudice and discrimination LGB individuals experience because of their minority status could increase mental health issues (Alessi, 2014). According to Meyer's minority stress theory, LGB individuals

experience the effects of negative social attitudes that could result in isolation and/or hiding their sexual orientation from family and friends (Alessi, 2014; Meyer, 2003). Meyer (2003) explained that the perception LGB individuals have about themselves within heteronormative society and how they adapt to the stressors, stigma, prejudice, and discrimination could impact their mental health, resulting in psychological distress. The participants of this study experienced distal events such as "name calling," sexual comments, and denigrating comments as the result of their gender. Based on the findings of this study, the participants used positive techniques and resources to manage their concerns and the frustrations that were entailed with being part of a sexual minority group within the military.

The military hierarchy has relevant importance within the study in relationship with the minority stress theory. The proximal stressors are the fear of the participant of not being accepted within their unit as well as fear of retaliation from unit leaders. Some of the participants experienced direct distal stressors from their leaders as well as their coworkers within their units. When reducing distal stressors related to leadership or unit acceptance, participants felt more comfortable sharing and disclosing their identities. In addition, as participants increase their ranks through their military careers, the proximal stressor of acceptance diminished as the result of their increased leadership status.

Limitations of the Study

Similar to other studies, this study had limitations that have to be discussed. The first limitation was the convenience sample. As a way to mitigate the limitation of convenience sampling, a sampling strategy to recruit participants from all branches of the

military was used to increase the likelihood that an adequate number of eligible participants were identified. Transferability was also limited to cisgender women who identified as a sexual minority and served in the military post 2013. The results are not able to be transferred to female sexual minority service members who served only prior to 2013 or to transgender individuals. Also, transferability is limited in regard to race and ethnicity. Women in the military who hold two or more minority identities, for instance Black and sexual minority or Hispanic and sexual minority, have different experiences. The concept of intersectionality needs further research for women in the military who hold more than one minority identity.

Another limitation is the representation of the sample who participated in the study. Even though I distributed the recruitment process through different outlets of social media, the majority of the participants served within the United States Army and Navy, which means that the five branches were not equally represented through participants.

Another limitation was that the recruitment process for the participants of the study was undertaken through the websites and social media of certain supportive organizations that had members who belonged to the LGB community. This meant that individuals within the larger community who did not belong to these affirmative organizations were not as easily able to be reached for participation.

Recommendations

Women in the military have been treated as inferiors because of their gender. Reviewing the literature, there is not much information to be found about female service

members as sexual minorities. Thus, I recommend that future research on this minority group be undertaken. It is especially important to include an equal sample from all the branches to understand their experiences as part of a minority group across the entire Armed Forces. The experiences of female service members as sexual minorities could be different depending of the branch of service they served, for instance, female service members from the Navy, Coast Guard, and Marines.

Another recommendation for future studies would be to extend the experiences of female service members as sexual minorities, taking in consideration race and ethnicity. It would be interesting to study how sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity intersect and how similar or different the experiences of the female service members are based on those two variables and how potentially could impact their careers in the Armed Forces.

Further research is recommended to understand how gender identity and presentation of physical appearance influence the experiences of female service member as sexual minority. The understanding of those experiences based on their gender identity could be a potential influence for harassment and/or discrimination within their units.

Education for military leaders to help them understand the experiences of female sexual minority service members in terms of inclusion within their units should be required as part of their foundation trainings. After the changes in military policies for inclusion of LGB service members in services and benefits same as heterosexual service members, leaders should receive education to avoid discrimination and bias within their units, especially for female service members as sexual minorities. Also, improving the process of reporting sexual harassment for this minority group should also be undertaken

so as to help service members feel safe enough to report sexual harassment and abuse and to guarantee that retaliation will not happen. Even though the participants of this study encouraged other women to join the Armed Forces, it is still necessary to create a safe and trusting environment within the military community for this minority group.

Implications

This research provided understanding regarding the experiences that female sexual minority service members had in the military. The results of this study could inform the practice of military providers working with this minority group. The results provide evidence of the importance and need of education in-services to increase awareness of possible stressors female sexual minority service members confront through their experiences as a sexual minority and woman in the military. In addition, the study provides evidence of the importance of improving the process of reporting sexual harassment for female service members so that they can report their perpetrators without fearing retaliation.

This study provides knowledge about female sexual minority service members and their experiences to improve the services available for this group and raise awareness of their need to feel included in their units and within the military community. The results of this research further understanding of the lack of support and safety that female service members often experience during their military careers within their units.

The implications for social change that this study provides are important for the future of education and advocacy services for this population. Both military and nonmilitary providers that offer services to this population can benefit from this study to

understand the experiences of female sexual minority service members and how those services could be individualized based on their personal experiences.

Conclusion

Throughout the history of the Armed Forces, women who decide to join the military have been treated as the inferior class compared to men. For female sexual minority service members, these experiences have been more stressful as the result of their sexual orientation, especially before the repeal of the policy DADT. After 2013, LGB service members were given the same benefits as heterosexual service members. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that female sexual minority service members are still facing isolation, distrust, and lack of safety within their units. Through the literature reviewed, female service members are considered as sexual minorities. Military leaders need to receive education and training to understand female service members sexual minorities in order to guarantee a safe environment and protection for them. Revision of the sexual harassment reporting process should include consideration of female service members that are identified as sexual minorities such as LGB service members.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Seeking female service members who identify as a sexual minority to participate in a research study

A PhD graduate student is looking to interview female service members who self-identify as a sexual minority.

- one time 60-minute interview, 30-minute follow up interview
- looking for active duty or retired female servicemembers, who served after 2013 in the Marines, Army, Airforce, Navy, or Coast Guard
- you will be asked questions about your experiences as a woman and sexual minority in the military

- Please contact the researcher at XXX@waldenu.edu if you are interested in participating.

IRB number: 06-16-20-0530773

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. Demographic information:

    a. How you identify your sexual orientation?

    b. What is your gender identity?

    c. What is your rank?

    d. How old are you?

    e. What is your relationship status?

        a. How long have you been in this relationship?

2. Experiences in the military as a sexual minority woman:

    a. What are your experiences being a woman in the military?

    b. What are your experiences being a sexual minority in the military?

    c. What are your experiences as a female sexual minority?

    d. Are you out to your chain of Command?

        a. Why or why not?

        b. Describe your experience.

    c. Have you disclosed your sexual orientation to your military provider (counselor or doctor)?

        a. If yes, how did the provider react?

        b. If no, what are the reasons you have not disclosed?

        c. How has your experience as a female sexual minority service member been similar or different from a heterosexual female service member?

d. What is the worst experience you had in the military related to your sexual orientation?

f. What is the best experience you had in the military related to your sexual orientation?

g. How have changes in military policies related to inclusion of gay and lesbian service members impacted your military career?

h. How have changes in military policies related to inclusion of gay and lesbian service members impacted your spouse intimate partner or dating/romantic life?

i. If a sexual minority woman was seeking advice from you about joining the military, what would you tell her about your experiences?

j. Do you believe that the military is fully inclusive for lesbian woman?

    a. Why or why not? Please explain.

k. How do or did you manage the stressors that you experienced as a service member related to your gender and sexual orientation?

l. Is there anything else you would like to share that you think might be important to understand your experience as sexual minority and woman in the military?